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**Sola Fide and the Perseverance of the Saints:  
Articles of Faith in Tension?**

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**Introduction**

When posed with the opportunity to write this article, I initially considered it too simple a question. Approaching this from a confessionally Reformed perspective, my knee-jerk reaction was, “Of course there is no tension here, so why bother?” But even a cursory reflection on the wider theological scene, both within and without

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Reformed circles, provides more than ample evidence that there is not only a great deal of confusion on this matter, but also a necessary need to re-illustrate that affirming the traditional Reformed doctrine of the perseverance/preservation of the saints is one of the most important litmus tests in determining a consistent doctrine of salvation *sola fide*. Hence, tensions do indeed arise within views that claim justification by faith alone if, but then replace the Reformed notion of God's preservation of the saints with a definition of perseverance which is conditional upon the believer's own ability to persevere. Any compromise or rejection of the monergistic notion of God's preservation of the saints by default results in some form of a synergistic understanding of the Christian's perseverance, thus causing the Christian's ultimate salvation to rest on something more than resting in the finished work of Christ.

### Contemporary background

In Reformed and Evangelical circles recent developments like the New Perspective on Paul and the Federal Vision controversies have called the longstanding doctrine of the perseverance of the saints into question for many. Whether one looks to E.P Sanders' language of believers potentially being "excluded from the body of those who will be saved,"<sup>2</sup> James Dunn's notion of needing to "maintain" one's justified status through obedience,<sup>3</sup> or Don Garlington's language of obedience being necessary for "final justification,"<sup>4</sup> the overall formula arising from the New Perspective on Paul is that believers can experience "initial" justification, but are not guaranteed to receive that same verdict at the end. This is so, according to N. T. Wright, because God will justify Christians based on the entirety of their lives, in accordance with works:

Paul, in company with mainstream Second Temple Judaism, affirms that God's final judgment will be in accordance with the entirety of a life led-in accordance, in other words, with works. He says it clearly... in that terrifying passage about

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<sup>2</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 354.

<sup>4</sup> Don Garlington, *Faith, Obedience and Perseverance: Aspects of Paul's Letter to the Romans: Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 79*. Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1994, 67-69.

church builders in 1 Corinthians 3... [Rom 2:13 is] the first statement about justification in Romans, and lo and behold it affirms justification according to works! The doers of the law, Paul says, will be justified. Shock, horror; Paul cannot (so many have thought) have really meant it...Paul means what he says.<sup>5</sup>

With varying degrees of commitment those associated with the New Perspective on Paul typically feel no burden to comply with traditional protestant notions of salvation *sola fide* and thus, no real tension results from their rejection of the doctrine of perseverance. Their formulations have, however, caused such tensions within many Reformed denominations that some have felt compelled to reaffirm the necessity of confessing that perseverance is an inseparable benefit of union with Christ.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar but nevertheless distinct manner, those associated with the Federal Vision have played a significant role in those same denominational clarifications. As a result of their understanding of an objective bestowal of union with Christ through baptism, they hold to a concomitant notion of the loss such union. However, this does not equate to the traditional Reformed notion of baptism effecting one's connection to the visible church; rather, they argue that, "by our baptism we have been reborn, in this sense, having died with Christ, we have been raised with him.... *The same is true for all who are baptized.*"<sup>7</sup> This state, however, is not secure, because some of these baptized people "will look back and discover that they were reprobate on that last day but they will also see that in history ... that in history God did graciously, really bring them into his church, that he really made them a part of his chosen people, that he gave them genuine promises that are just as real, just as dependable, just as trustworthy as

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<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 253; *Mark for Everyone* (London: Westminster/ John Knox, 2004), 233.

<sup>6</sup> *Report of Ad Interim Study Committee on Federal Vision, New Perspective, and Auburn Avenue Theologies*, Presbyterian Church in America (St Louis: PCA Historical Center, 2007); *Justification: Report of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, Committee on Christian Education (Willow Grove, PA, 2007); *Report of the Synodical Study Committee on the Federal Vision and Justification*, United Reformed Churches of North America (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Steve Wilkins, "The Legacy of the Half-Way Covenant," (2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference, tape 11, side 2)

the promises he gave to people who do persevere to the end.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, those within this movement propose a similar formula of initial and final justification to account for this scenario of those who at one point possessed justification, who nevertheless become severed from Christ. For instance, using the analogy of the white robes given in Rev.1:19, Rich Lusk argues that,

...initial reception of the white garment is by faith alone; ongoing possession of the garment is maintained by faithful obedience. ...The white robes stand first and foremost for Christ’s free gift to his people. Just as he is clothed in white (cf. Rev. 1, 19), so he clothes his people in white. Their “whiteness” before the Father’s throne is due solely to his death and resurrection. In this sense, the robes stand for initial justification. But this forensic justification cannot be separated from the good works that make the saints worthy of their new apparel. In other words, the poetic imagery points in the same direction as the theological prose of Paul (Rom. 2:13) and James (2:14ff): those who will be vindicated in the end are those who have been faithfully obedient.<sup>9</sup>

A degree of tension does indeed exist here because there does seem to be a desire on the part of many within the Federal Vision movement (composed largely of pastors within confessionally Reformed denominations) to affirm justification by faith alone. In seeking to fit their views within their confessional traditions many in the Federal Vision have argued that orthodoxy is retained in their scheme because all of the elect are guaranteed to persevere to the end.<sup>10</sup> However, the reality that there are still people within this scheme that have experienced all the benefits of union with Christ except perseverance, has led to the very denominational rejections mentioned above, on the basis that it ultimately compromises salvation by faith alone.

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<sup>8</sup> John Barach, “Covenant and Election,” Lecture delivered at the 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors Conference, available at <http://www.reformedalberta.ca/Doctrine/Sections/Covenant/Unconditional/Unconditional04.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Lusk, “Future Justification to the Doers of the Law”, (2003) available at [http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/future\\_justification\\_to\\_the\\_doers\\_of\\_the\\_law.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/future_justification_to_the_doers_of_the_law.htm); see also James Jordan, “Merit Versus Maturity: What Did Jesus Do for Us?” in *The Federal Vision*, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004), 194-195; Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Wilson, “Visible and Invisible Church Revisited,” 2002 Auburn Avenue Pastors’ Conference, side 2, 408; *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 305-325.

Thus, while these two groups themselves do not seem caught in tension (given their affirmation of two-stage justification) their influence has led to a recent increase in concern among Evangelicals and Reformed over the relationship of perseverance to salvation by faith alone. As I said at the outset, I will demonstrate that no tension exists in the Reformed understanding of these two doctrines, as well as the fact that rejecting or compromising the notion of God’s preservation of the believer causes a tension for anyone attempting to claim adherence to salvation *sola fide*. Therefore we will first briefly survey the Lutheran and Arminian formulations which currently suffer in this tension and then examine the legitimacy of the Reformed arguments in defense of the preservation/perseverance of the saints.

### **The Lutheran Tension**

The disagreement that the Lutherans and the Reformed have expressed with each other over the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints has existed since almost the beginning. The Lutheran dogmatician Francis Pieper, writing in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, minced no words on this issue when he argued that, “Scripture clearly teaches that a true believer may lapse from grace and lose his faith.” He went on to add, “This truth must be maintained against the Calvinists, who insist that believers, while committing enormous sins, lose only the exercise of faith (*exercitium fidei*) but not faith itself. Our Lutheran Confessions reject this Calvinistic teaching as unscriptural and pernicious.”<sup>11</sup> As early as 1530 the signatories of the Augsburg Confession stated that they “condemn the Anabaptists, who deny that those who have once been justified can lose the Holy Spirit.”<sup>12</sup> While some argue that this statement laid the groundwork for the later Lutheran disagreement with the Reformed on this issue, there is too much evidence to the

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<sup>11</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 2: 467-468.

<sup>12</sup> *Augsburg Confession*, art. XII, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 45.

contrary.<sup>13</sup> One finds clearer evidence for the initial seeds of this doctrine as early as 1521 in Philip Melanchthon's discussion of mortal and venial sins in the first edition of his *Loci Communes*.<sup>14</sup>

In 1537 Luther, with the aid of several leading “Lutheran” theologians, published the *Smalcald Articles*, which were designed to function as a theological confession. In it they stated that “it is necessary to know and teach that when holy people...somehow fall into a public sin (such as David, who fell into adultery, murder, and blasphemy against God), at that point faith and the Spirit have departed.” The reason that they affixed to this was the existence of reigning sin, not strictly apostasy from the faith. “The Holy Spirit does not allow sin to rule and gain the upper hand so that it is brought to completion, but the Spirit controls and resists so that sin is not able to do whatever it wants. However, when sin does whatever it wants, then the Holy Spirit and faith are not there.”<sup>15</sup> In 1555 Melanchthon published his mature thoughts on the nature of mortal and venial sins in his final edition of his *Loci Communes*, and followed this same line of thought:

But when those who have been born again knowingly and willfully break the law of God, as when they take up ungodly opinions or establish them by their own authority or indulge in hatred, ambition, lusts, avarice, or other outward infractions which are counter to the law of God... such actions are mortal sins which are against conscience, and the person who allows them loses grace, faith, and the Holy Spirit and brings upon himself the wrath of God; and unless he is again turned to God, he will be lost in eternal punishment. Because his

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<sup>13</sup> For example, the fact that Calvin, himself a signatory of the Augsburg Confession, could say, as late as 1557, “in regard to the Confession of Augsburg my answer is, that it does not contain a word contrary to our doctrine,” should indicate that it was a strictly Anabaptist fanaticism that the signatories condemned. See John Calvin, “Last Admonition of John Calvin to Joachim Westphal,” in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 2: 355. It is interesting to note, however, that this specific phrase was quoted by Arminius in order to show the wider acceptance of this view among those outside Reformed circles. See, James Arminius, “An Apology or Defence of James Arminius” in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols (Auburn & Buffalo, NY: Derby, Miller & Orton, 1853) 1: 280; see also John Jefferson Davis, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A History of the Doctrine,” *JETS* 34/2 (June 1991) 213-228.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes 1521* in *Melanchthon and Bucer: The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XIX, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 132.

<sup>15</sup> *The Smalcald Articles*, Art. 3, in *The Book of Concord*, 319.

conscience then has the intent of sinning, he despises God and flees from Him and cannot call upon Him.<sup>16</sup>

Serious disputes arose in the years following Luther's death among the disciples of Melancthon (Philipists) and the Gnesio-Lutherans. While they disagreed over several significant issues, this issue of the amissibility of salvation, however, was not in contention. *The Formula of Concord*, in many ways proof of the victory of the Gnesio-Lutherans, re-established this doctrine confessionally in 1577 arguing that "if the baptized act against their conscience, permit sin to reign in them, and thus grieve the Holy Spirit in themselves and lose him, then, although they may not be rebaptized, they must be converted again..."<sup>17</sup> Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), one of the two primary influences behind the *Formula of Concord* developed further these same notions in his *Loci Theologici*, which began as commentary on Melancthon's *Loci Communes* of 1521 and resulted in what some have described as a "systematic presentation of biblical theology". His influence on the shape that Lutheran theology would take is second only to Luther himself:<sup>18</sup>

But the teachings should be denounced which proclaim abroad that all sins are equal and that the elect always retain the Holy Spirit even when they are guilty of atrocious backslidings.... [W]hat they customarily call mortal sin can be called reigning or dominant sin. For when Paul says in Rom. 6, "Let not sin reign in your mortal body", he already passes on this same distinction of which we have spoken. We confess that there is sin in the reborn, but not reigning or dominating as long as they do not yield to sin, but resist. But if sin gains control, it leads to eternal perdition, and the term "reigning" in itself reveals its atrocity and power... [This state of affairs] kindles the wrath of God, and drives man from God. And the man abandoned by God is driven by his own weakness and by the devil, so that he runs from evil to evil and heaps up crimes and punishments. He is like Saul who, when he had been endowed with the Holy Spirit and adorned with most beautiful virtues and illustrious victories, succumbed to the first flames of jealousy.... But then as Saul indulged, sin began to dominate him, that is, guilt remained, and the wrath of God was

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<sup>16</sup> Philip Melancthon, *The Chief Theological Topics: Loci Praecipui Theologici 1559*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 233.

<sup>17</sup> *The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*, Art. II. 69, in *Book of Concord*, 557.

<sup>18</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 1:48-49.

kindled. The Holy Spirit was cast out and vexed, and the mind abandoned by God became weaker and more enslaved to lust.<sup>19</sup>

It is crucial to see here that in the Lutheran framework mortal sin does not equate to apostasy or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Chemnitz, Luther and Melancthon all made clear the danger that the believer faces can arise from indulging in a multitude of different sins; neither blasphemy against the Spirit nor the renouncing of belief were strictly in their purview.<sup>20</sup> As seen above, Chemnitz equates mortal sin with Paul's warning against letting various sins "reign" in the life of the Christian. And thus Chemnitz argued that any who fail to heed such caution and indulge in any sin to that degree, "through [their] mortal sin repentance is crushed and faith driven out, the Holy Spirit grieved and tormented, the grace of God along with the remission of sins and the inheritance of eternal life is lost and the person is again guilty of the wrath of God, eternal death and condemnation."<sup>21</sup>

However, in the Lutheran scheme, as seen above in the *Formula of Concord*, those who fall in such a fashion can gain restoration again and again. As late as 1707, during the twilight of Lutheran Orthodoxy, the very influential David Hollaz (1648-1713) continued to maintain and defend this confessional position:

The grace of regeneration is lost when sins are committed deliberately, and are subversive of conscience (1 Tim. 1:19). But regeneration lost may be recovered by the penitent (Gal. 4 : 19). Men regenerate, aided by the preserving grace of God, should be carefully on their guard, lest, by the repetition of sin, they maliciously do injury to conscience; but if, nevertheless, they are overcome by the machinations of the devil, the enticements of the world, and the suggestions of the flesh, and fall three or four times, or oftener, into mortal sin, they need not at all despair of the converting and regenerating grace of God.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, quoted in *The Doctrine of Man in Classical Lutheran Theology, Translated from the works of Martin Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1962), 200-201.

<sup>20</sup> Though some their arguments often link mortal sin as a potential cause of apostasy.

<sup>21</sup> Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 2:678.

<sup>22</sup> David Hollaz, *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum*, 886, quoted in, Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church: Exhibited and Verified from the Original Sources*, trans. Charles A. Hay (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1876), 465. See also Hollaz's discussion of mortal and venial sins, 252-254; Preus, 65.



Thus there exists a fair amount of homogeneity on this point in the development of confessional Lutheran theology. In our brief 500 year survey, confessional Lutheranism has consistently not only defended the notion that the Christian can be severed from Christ because of persistent sin, but also rejected the Reformed alternative of the guaranteed preservation/perseverance of the Christian.

Tension necessarily arises, however, with the ironic fact that confessional Lutherans are not only frequently the most clear and vociferous champions of *Sola Fide*, but so often argue for it with the pastoral aim of establishing assurance of salvation for the Christian.<sup>23</sup> As Luther himself said, “It would be most foolish of God to give us his Son and the Scriptures and the prophets if he wished us to be uncertain and to doubt concerning our salvation. It is the work of the devil to make us unbelieving and doubtful.”<sup>24</sup> In one of his more famous discussions of assurance Luther, in typical fashion, stoutly condemned those who would dare rob the Christian of this confidence and instill in them doubt about their future:

I can judge that any message is a lie and the devil’s doctrine, which turns the two things around and declares: It is not for us to know whether we live in grace, but we must promote and perform good works at random and with doubts in our minds. One may reasonably say to them: “If I am to hear no other comfort from you than this, that I can never know how I stand with God, then be the devil’s confessor, and be a preacher in the abyss of hell!”<sup>25</sup>

The confessional Lutheran articulation of the doctrine of justification *sola fide* is beyond dispute so proving it here is unnecessary. Referencing it here, however, is crucial in order to illustrate the tenuous position that they place *sola fide* in as a result of the possibility of losing that same justification specifically though the believer’s sin. The *Formula of Concord* made very clear that a believer’s works do not contribute to their justification in any sense:

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<sup>23</sup> See Randal Zachman’s discussion of Luther’s views on this in *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 63-68; see also G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Perseverance*, trans. Robert D. Knudsen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 55.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel in The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XVIII, ed. & trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 131.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John: Chapters 14-16*, in *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 24, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Martin Bertram (St Louis: Concordia, 1961), 218.

[W]e unanimously believe, teach and confess...that poor sinful people are justified before God, that is, absolved – pronounced free of all sins and of the judgment of the damnation that they deserved and accepted as children and heirs of eternal life – without the least bit of our own merit or worthiness, apart from all preceding, present, or subsequent works. We are justified on the basis of sheer grace because of the sole merit, entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness.<sup>26</sup>

And this document clarified multiple times that “neither the contrition that precedes, nor the works that follow, belong in the article or transaction of justification by faith. For good works do not precede justification, but follow it, and the person must first be justified before he can do good works.”<sup>27</sup>

No one can level any legitimate charge that the confessional Lutheran doctrine of justification remotely opens the door to synergism. However it is difficult to reconcile the language that specifically precludes future works as contributing toward one's salvation as well as the language of all sins being forgiven in the moment of justification with the language above that the believer can be severed from Christ not merely by rejecting the faith, but for permitting any sin to reign in their lives.<sup>28</sup> While there exists in the Lutheran tradition the belief that the elect will indeed persevere to the end (even though, as seen above, they can lose and regain their salvation), nevertheless, within this scheme, there are still those who experience all the benefits of Christ's work and yet perish for lack of retaining those benefits. Thus, in confessional Lutheranism, the Christian must retain their forgiven, justified, adopted, regenerate and indwelt state by resisting the reign of sin in their life; thus their claims of a consistent adherence to *sola fide* certainly appear tenuous.

### **Arminianism**

Discussing the Arminian position becomes more difficult since notions of Arminian confessional unanimity do not exist. Roger Olson and others have helpfully reminded the larger Calvinistic community that Arminianism is not monolithic, thus an awareness of

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<sup>26</sup> *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*, III. 9, *Book of Concord*, 563.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, *Solid Declaration*, III. 27, 566.

<sup>28</sup> Though the notion of the believer having the ability to throw off the power of the Holy Spirit does indeed create a similar tension which we will deal with below.

varied “Arminianisms” needs to inform any investigation of this kind.<sup>29</sup> Recent work on this issue divided the Arminian camp into “Reformed” and “Wesleyan” wings; I will operate along similar lines, opting instead for the term “Traditional Arminian” (linking this view closely with those of Arminius, himself), over “Reformed Arminian. I will not deal with the more Pelagian-leaning views on this subject in the vein originally of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), but popularized in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in America through the likes of John Miley and H. Orton Wiley. Their rejection of substitutionary atonement theories place them in a similar camp as those above who experience no tension on the issue of perseverance because they make no real claims to a salvation by faith alone.<sup>30</sup>

### Traditional Arminianism

On October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1608, Jacob Arminius addressed the governing officials of the States of Holland, delivering his *Declaration of the Sentiments of Arminius*, in order to clear his name of what he described as a “sinister report” that had been “industriously and extensively circulated about me” which was based on “unfounded rumor and has already operated most injuriously against me.”<sup>31</sup> In it he issued ten doctrinal statements designed to clarify his views and to defend himself against the errors that had been attributed to him. As Richard Muller has shown, there have been few theologians as influential as Arminius that have nevertheless suffered so much neglect in the area of theological and historical analysis.<sup>32</sup> While many study the debates surrounding the Synod of Dort, very few have sought to examine Arminius’s actual system; hence, many misunderstandings and misinterpretations abound.

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<sup>29</sup> Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 12-43; “Don’t Hate Because I’m An Arminian,” *Christianity Today*, September 6, 1999, 87-94; Stephen Ashby, “A Reformed Arminian View,” in *Four Views on Eternal Security*, ed. Mathew Pinson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 149-154.

<sup>30</sup> One wonders at the legitimacy of the application of the word “Arminian” to these views when one reads Arminius’ actual words on these subjects. I concur with Michael Horton when he says “Most card-carrying Arminians today would probably regard Arminius’ views as too Reformed!”. See, Michael Horton, *Four Views on Eternal Security*, 188.

<sup>31</sup> Arminius, “A Declaration of the Sentiments of James Arminius,” 1:193-194.

<sup>32</sup> Richard A. Muller, *God, Creation and Providence in the Thought of Jacob Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 1-14.

In what may come as a shock to those unfamiliar with the origins of Arminianism, Arminius stated the following concerning the doctrine of Justification:

I believe that sinners are accounted righteous solely by the obedience of Christ; and that the righteousness of Christ is the only meritorious cause on account of which God pardons the sins of believers and reckons them as righteous as if they had perfectly fulfilled the law. But since God imputes the righteousness of Christ to none except believers, I conclude that, in this sense, it may be well and properly said, to a man who believes, faith is imputed for righteousness through grace, because God hath set forth his Son, Jesus Christ, to be a propitiation, a throne of grace, (or mercy seat) through faith in his blood.<sup>33</sup>

Far from the near full Pelagianism often attributed to the Arminian position (both from those within and without the Arminian tradition) Arminius' definition of justification resonates with the very Dutch Reformed Orthodoxy in which Arminius was raised, affirming even the imputation of Christ's active obedience for the Christian's justification.<sup>34</sup> While there were indeed questions concerning other opinions on this doctrine that Arminius was willing to tolerate, his affirmation that Christians are justified based upon Christ's work alone are bold and clear.

In that same *Declaration*, Arminius also discussed his views on "The Perseverance of the Saints." In this declaration, he began by articulating a fairly noncontroversial version of what had been professed in the Reformed church:

My sentiments respecting the perseverance of the saints are, that those persons who have been grafted into Christ by true faith, and have thus been made partakers of his life-giving Spirit, possess sufficient powers (or strength) to fight against Satan, sin, the world and their own flesh, and to gain the victory over these enemies—yet not without the assistance of the grace of the same Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ also by his Spirit assists them in all their temptations, and affords them the ready aid of his hand; and, provided they stand prepared for the battle, implore his help, and be not wanting to themselves, Christ preserves them

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<sup>33</sup> Arminius, "Declaration of Sentiments", 264; see also "The Apology or Defence", art. XXIV, 355-358.

<sup>34</sup> See Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 139, 193, 310-311; "Arminius as a Reformed Theologian" in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. John H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

from falling. So that it is not possible for them, by any of the cunning craftiness or power of Satan, to be either seduced or dragged out of the hands of Christ.<sup>35</sup>

However immediately following this, he admitted his lack of resolve on this issue and confessed his need for more study and clarity particularly concerning “whether it is not possible for some individuals through negligence to desert the commencement of their existence in Christ, to cleave again to the present evil world, to decline from the sound doctrine which was once delivered to them, to lose a good conscience, and to cause Divine grace to be ineffectual.”<sup>36</sup> Arminius was quick to add that “I never taught that a true believer can, either totally or finally fall away from the faith, and perish; yet I will not conceal, that there are passages of scripture which seem to me to wear this aspect; and those answers to them which I have been permitted to see, are not of such a kind as to approve themselves on all points to my understanding.”<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, in his more elaborate “Apology or Defense” of his views, Arminius argued that a great deal of latitude ought to be permitted on this issue citing specifically early church fathers and, most importantly, Philip Melancthon and his disciples as examples of those who argue that “it is possible for believers finally to decline and fall away from faith and salvation.”<sup>38</sup> Additionally, he freely admitted that “at one time I certainly did say, with an explanation subjoined to it, ‘that it was possible for believers *finally* to decline or fall way from faith and salvation.’ But at no period have I asserted, ‘that believers do finally fall away from faith or salvation.’”<sup>39</sup> Thus, he gave clear indications concerning his movement in this direction, even though it was equally clear that he had not yet come to any firm conclusion on the matter.

Thus just a few pages apart, in the beginning stages of what would later blossom into full “Arminianism,” the ground work was laid for the serious tension that resulted: How indeed can someone be

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<sup>35</sup> Arminius, “Declaration of Sentiments”, 254.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Arminius, “Apology or Defence”, 278-280. Especially intriguing here is the possibility that Melancthonian synergism is one of the primary influences behind Arminius’ shift away from the Genevan Calvinism in which he was trained. On this point see Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation*, 310-311; Muller, 5-11.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 281. (emphasis original).

credited with the perfect righteousness of Christ and receive also the propitiation accomplished by Christ's finished work as a gift through faith, not obedience, and yet again incur the wrath of God? Either propitiation was not accomplished, or the gift is not bestowed through faith but rather through a combination of an initial reception through faith and then a maintenance of that status through one's own adherence to the commands of God.

In 1610, the Remonstrants still voiced some doubt concerning the doctrine of the perseverance of that saints in much the same way that their Forbear Arminius did, admitting that the issue “must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we ourselves can teach it with full persuasion of our minds.”<sup>40</sup> However, by 1618 they had reached such clarity and published “The Opinions of the Remonstrants” in response to the Synod of Dordt. Their development of Arminius' views furthered these initial doubts about the guaranteed perseverance of the saints into an outright denial of it: “True believers can fall from true faith and can fall into such sins as cannot be consistent with true and justifying faith; not only is it possible for this to happen, but it even happens frequently. True believers are able to fall through their own fault into shameful and atrocious deeds, to persevere and to die in them; and therefore finally to fall and to perish.”<sup>41</sup> Not wanting to condemn all notions or instances of assurance of salvation they sought to distance themselves from Rome and argued that believers could experience temporary moments of assurance and certainty of God's grace, but these were all dependent upon their believer's own will to persevere to the end and, perhaps most importantly, to resist the reign of sin in their lives:

A true believer can and ought indeed to be certain for the future that he is able, by diligent watchfulness, through prayers, and through other holy exercises, to persevere in true faith, and he ought also to be certain that divine grace for persevering will never be lacking; but we do not see how he can be certain that he will never afterwards be remiss in his duty but that he will persevere in faith and in those works of piety and love which are fitting for a believer in this

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<sup>40</sup> Philip Schaff, "The Five Arminian Articles, 1610," in *The Creeds of Christendom Volume III: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 549.

<sup>41</sup> “The Opinions of the Remonstrants,” in Peter Y. DeJong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dordt, 1618-1619*, trans. Anthony A. Hoekema (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 1968), 220.

school of Christian warfare; neither do we deem it necessary that concerning this thing a believer should be certain.<sup>42</sup>

Today's defenders of the traditional Arminian view include Stephen M. Ashby, Scot McKnight, Robert Shank and Robert E. Picirilli among others.<sup>43</sup> Like Arminius, they make similar statements concerning justification by faith alone and some even exert a good deal of effort pointing out the dangers that the more Pelagian-leaning branches of Arminianism have caused by their adherence to non-substitutionary theories of the atonement.<sup>44</sup> However, because of their rejection of the Reformed understanding of the perseverance of the saints, they find themselves in a similar quandary of defending notions of a justification by faith alone which must then be maintained by one's own ability to persevere.

Focusing many of their arguments on the rejection of "particularism" in God's sovereign plan to redeem, they defend a doctrine of justification by faith alone that is offered to all, that all have the ability to reject both before and after one has been justified. For instance Ashby argues, "If divine grace is resistible prior to conversion, it is also resistible after conversion," and couches it all in the notion that God must respect the free will of His creatures.<sup>45</sup> Similarly Scot McKnight, writing on the warning passages of the Book of Hebrews, says on the one hand that "final salvation is achieved through the perfect sacrifice of Christ.... Jesus' salvation provides for the final eschatological perfection of the people of God... bringing believers to their intended goal."<sup>46</sup> However he then adds that believers can all experience salvation "as a present reality, the continuance of which is dependent upon perseverance. If that person does not persevere, there will be a cessation of that former

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusion," *Trinity Journal* 13 NS (1992): 21-59; Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance* (Springfield, MO: Westcott, 1976); Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), 197-210; "Foreknowledge, Freedom and the Future," *JETS* 43 (2000): 259-271; see also F. Leroy Forlines, *The Quest for Truth: Answering Life's Inescapable Questions* (Nashville: Random House, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Stephen M. Ashby, *Four Views on Eternal Security*, 149-154.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>46</sup> McKnight, 57.

reality.”<sup>47</sup> Thus he concludes, “[F]inal salvation is not unconditional. It is conditional, and that single condition is persevering faith.”<sup>48</sup>

One wonders what it is in their scheme that causes some to persevere to the end while others fail to do so, if it is not the gracious preserving power of God, through the Holy Spirit? If, as the traditional Arminian seems to argue, the Christian's final salvation ultimately depends upon their will to persevere, and this perseverance occurs as long as the will chooses obedience, how then can any notion of *sola fide* stand?

### Wesleyan Arminianism

Those claiming John Wesley as a theological forbear are legion and in some ways bear very little resemblance to one another. The absence of much of a confessional or creedal heritage typically lends itself to this sort of variegation. On this issue, as noted above, there are many hailing from ostensibly Wesleyan camps that experience no tension because they have long since rejected notions of substitutionary atonement and thus by implication anything resembling the classically Protestant understanding of *sola fide*. Wesley's own thinking on this matter only increases the difficulty of arriving at precise definitions of justification by faith alone, because on this, as well as other doctrines, he was something of a journeyman. Wesley's assessment of the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is clear: he rejected it outright. However determining what he thought concerning the justification of the sinner takes a bit of work to determine.

In his famous *Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints*, Wesley began by asking a series of poignant questions: “Can a child of God, then, go to hell? Or can a man be a child of God today, and a child of the devil tomorrow? If God is our Father once, is he not our Father always?”<sup>49</sup> His initial answer was that as long as one retains their faith, then their salvation could not be taken away: “A child of God - that is, a true believer - (for he that believeth is born of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>49</sup> John Wesley, “Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints”, in *The Works of John Wesley*, (London: Wesleyan Book Room, 1872; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007), 10:297.



God,) while he continues a true believer, cannot go to hell.”<sup>50</sup> He then, however, gave an altogether different answer concerning what he deemed the loss of faith: “If a believer makes shipwreck of the faith, he is no longer a child of God; and then he may go to hell, yea, and certainly will, if he continues in unbelief.”<sup>51</sup> How could such a scenario occur? “If a believer may make shipwreck of the faith, then a man that believes now may be an unbeliever some time hence; yea, very possibly tomorrow; but if so, he who is a child of God today, may be a child of the devil tomorrow. For, God is the Father of them that believe, so long as they believe; but the devil is the father of them that believe not, whether they did once believe or no.”<sup>52</sup> Wesley then culled many of the Scriptures that are traditionally marshaled in favor of perseverance via God’s preservation but arrived at the opposite conclusion:

The sum of all is this: If the Scriptures are true, those who are holy or righteous in the judgment of God himself; those who are endued with the faith that purifies the heart, that produces a good conscience; those who are grafted into the good olive-tree, the spiritual, invisible Church; those who are branches of the spiritual, invisible Church; those who are branches of the true vine, of whom Christ says, "I am the vine, ye are the branches;" those who so effectually know Christ as by that knowledge to have escaped the pollutions of the world; those who see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and who have been made partakers of the Holy Ghost, of the witness and of the fruits of the Spirit; those who live by faith in the Son of God; those who are sanctified by the blood of the covenant, *may nevertheless so fall from god as to perish everlastingly*. Therefore let him that standeth take heed lest he fall.<sup>53</sup>

As mentioned above these formulations are standard Wesleyan fare. However, is there a strong enough poll concerning justification by faith alone within Wesley's thought (and consequently those Wesleyan traditions who lean away from Pelagianism) to cause tension between these doctrines? Opinions differ both among those within and without the Wesleyan tradition.

Listening to Wesley, himself, one might easily conclude that his doctrine of justification was solidly Reformed. Wesley considered his

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 297-298.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 298. (emphasis added).

sermon entitled *Justification by Faith* to be one of his clearer and more complete treatments on the subject.<sup>54</sup> In it he proclaimed: “But, on what terms then is he justified who is altogether *ungodly*, and till that time *worketh not*? On one alone; which is faith: he ‘believeth in him that justifieth the ungodly.’” He continued, quoting Paul, that God “hath set forth [Christ] for a propitiation, through faith in his blood; that he might be just, and (consistently with his justice) the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus: Therefore, we conclude, that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the law.”<sup>55</sup> *Sola Fide* surely rings loudly here, but how exactly did Wesley define such faith? Was it synonymous with obedience? Wesley argued soundly to the contrary:

Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself,” but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for *my* sins, that he loved *me*, and gave himself for *me*. And at what time soever a sinner thus believes, be it in early childhood, in the strength of his years, or when he is old and hoary haired, God justifieth that ungodly one: God for the sake of his Son, pardoneth and absolveth him, who had in him, till then, no good thing. Repentance, indeed, God had given him before; but that repentance was neither more nor less than a deep sense of the want of all good, and the presence of all evil. And whatever good he hath or doth from that hour, when he first believes in God through Christ, faith does *not find*, but *bring*. This is the fruit of faith. First the tree is good, and then the fruit is good also.<sup>56</sup>

In case he was not clear, he went on to add that “I cannot describe the nature of this faith better, than in the words of our own church. ‘The only instrument of salvation,’ (whereof justification is one branch,) ‘is faith: that is, a sure trust and confidence that God both hath and will forgive our sins, that he hath accepted us again into his favour, for the merits of Christ's death and passion.’”<sup>57</sup>

What then did Wesley mean by the phrase, “the merits of Christ's death and passion?” Did he include in this the imputation of the active obedience of Christ as the ground of this justified status? He argued that for the Christian, “‘faith is imputed to him for righteousness’ the very moment that he believeth.” But then Wesley makes a curious

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<sup>54</sup> John Wesley, “Preface”, in *The Works of John Wesley* (London: Wesleyan Book Room, 1872; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007), 5: 9.

<sup>55</sup> Wesley, “Justification by Faith”, in *The Works of John Wesley* (London: Wesleyan Book Room, 1872; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007), 5:60.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

statement: “Not that God... thinketh him to be what he is not. But as ‘he made Christ to be sin for us,’ that is, treated him as a sinner, punishing him for our sins; so he counteth us righteous, from the time we believe in him: that is, he doth not punish us for our sins, yea, treats us as though we were guiltless and righteous.”<sup>58</sup> This gets to the crux of the matter and points out why Wesley’s explanations here differ from classic Reformed definitions. Though he worked hard to distinguish justification from sanctification, at the end of the day he was still convinced that God could not think someone “to be what he is not.” So on the one hand Wesley could argue that justification “is not the being made actually just and righteous. This is ‘sanctification;’ which is, indeed, in some degree, the immediate fruit of justification, but, nevertheless, is a distinct gift of God, and of a totally different nature.”<sup>59</sup> But on the very next page he seems to destroy that which he had just sought to protect:

Least of all does justification imply, that God is deceived in those whom he justifies; that he thinks them to be what, in fact, they are not; that he accounts them to be otherwise than they are. It does by no means imply, that God judges concerning us contrary to the real nature of things; that he esteems us better than we really are, or believes us righteous when we are unrighteous. Surely no. The judgment of the all-wise God is always according to truth. Neither can it ever consist with his unerring wisdom, to think that I am innocent, to judge that I am righteous or holy, because another is so. He can no more, in this manner, confound me with Christ, than with David or Abraham. Let any man to whom God hath given understanding, weigh this without prejudice; and he cannot but perceive, that such a notion of justification is neither reconcilable to reason nor Scripture.<sup>60</sup>

If justification cannot reflect things “otherwise than they are” and God must judge according to “the real nature of things” then his act of justification must be grounded in some sense according to a righteousness inherent within the believer. Wesley, in step with many who have shrunk from affirming the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s active obedience, does so for fear that such a doctrine gives aid and comfort to the antinomian and, indeed, even produces such: “For if the very personal obedience of Christ (as those expressions

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 57.

directly lead me to think) be mine the moment I believe, can anything be added thereto? Does my obeying God add any value to the perfect obedience of Christ? On this scheme, then, are not the holy and unholy on the very same footing?”<sup>61</sup> It seems as though Wesley felt compelled to incorporate the language of “implanted” righteousness as a distinct yet inseparable counterpart to imputed righteousness, in order to combat the potential abuse of a justification grounded wholly on an alien righteousness credited to those who believe.<sup>62</sup>

Wesley’s contemporary defenders continue and develop this same line of thought concerning the Wesleyan notion of justification based on an admixture of imputed and imparted righteousness. For example J. Stephen Harper argues:

Justification is not falsification or fantasy but is again the mysterious and marvelous blending of imputed and imparted righteousness. God can authentically justify us because of Christ, and because of Christ we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another. And because justification is viewed by Wesley as initial sanctification, it is the ongoing means by which God pardons and forgives us. We never outgrow our need to be justified by faith in Christ.<sup>63</sup>

When one compares Wesley's words on imputation with his view of what a believer’s indulging in sin can do to “make shipwreck” of their faith and thus jettison their justification before God, it becomes clear

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<sup>61</sup> Wesley, “Thoughts on the Imputed Righteousness of Christ,” *Works*, X, 315.

<sup>62</sup> Wesley is surely guilty of wavering on this issue and can be found other times heartily affirming the imputation of Christ's active obedience as the ground of the believer's justification and seeking to distinguish it from inherent righteousness which, he says, is the fruit of it in sanctification: “But do not you believe inherent righteousness? Yes, in its proper place; not as the ground of our acceptance with God, but as the fruit of it; not in the place of imputed righteousness, but as consequent upon it. That is, I believe God implants righteousness in every one to whom he has imputed it....They to whom the righteousness of Christ is imputed, are made righteous by the Spirit of Christ; are renewed in the image of God, ‘after the likeness wherein they were created, in righteousness and true holiness.’” Wesley, “The Lord our Righteousness,” in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, vol. 1 (New York: Waugh & Mason, 1836), 174; Ashby helpfully illustrates Wesley’s tension on these matters. See Ashby, *Four Views*, 183-186; see also Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 206-212.

<sup>63</sup> J. Stephen Harper, *Four Views*, 234-235. When surveying this topic mention must be made of the very influential work of “The Problem of Apostasy in the New Testament” in *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition: Essays in Honor of Dale Moody*, ed. Robert Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 65-80.

that while he seeks to secure justification on the sole ground of Christ's righteousness, maintaining this gift quite seriously depends on a Christian's dedication to walk in obedience.<sup>64</sup> I. Howard Marshall, one of the more influential voices in this debate in recent years, similarly denies that "the verdict that we have been justified by grace through faith mean[s] that we are certain to be justified on the day of judgment" and argues that there "must remain an element of doubt until the final sentence of acquittal is passed."<sup>65</sup> However, Marshall sees that the point of the exhortation passages in the NT are designed to bolster a sense of assurance, but one that is ultimately contingent upon the believer's efforts in persevering: "[T]hose who have responded to God's call with love (and faith) can be fully assured of his purpose of final glorification for them."<sup>66</sup> What does this response look like? "The way to persevere is simply – by persevering. There is no way of telling whether a given person in the church will persevere to the end; the fact of his perseverance at any given moment is shown in the fact that he is persevering."<sup>67</sup> For Marshall, however, this includes more than continuing to affirm one's faith, but also, like Wesley, resisting temptation to sin. Failure to resist "causes the believer to deny the power of God to preserve him from sinning, to return to the very things from which he was saved by belief in Christ ... In other words, sin is an act and attitude which is incompatible with the obedience of faith, and hence constitutes a denial of faith."<sup>68</sup> Thus there can be no guarantee of persevering to the end; one must retain

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<sup>64</sup> See especially Wesley's arguments in "A Call to Backsliders", in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, vol. 2 (London: Thomas Tegg, 1829), 286-297.

<sup>65</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), 91. Marshall does not necessarily fit into a Wesleyan mold, and has himself demurred from the title "Arminian", but as he writes from within the Methodist tradition, he is more closely allied to Wesley than Arminius. Marshall does not spend as much time discussing justification and *sola fide* as he does defending the substitutionary atonement while denying perseverance. He does however briefly mention that he thinks that imputation of Christ's active obedience is something that goes beyond the teaching of Paul. See, Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 312, n. 10.

<sup>66</sup> Marshall, "The Problem of Apostasy in the New Testament" in *Perspectives on Scripture and Tradition: Essays in Honor of Dale Moody*, ed. Robert Perkins (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 77.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, *Kept by the Power of God*, 205.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 197-198.

enough faith, exert enough love, and resist enough sin in order to maintain their justified status. Thus, Harper's explanation of a justification that must be continually sought, composed of both imputed and imparted righteousness, certainly seems to be a reasonable depiction of the Wesleyan view and thus, seriously calls into question any notion of a true adherence to justification *sola fide*.

### **The Reformed Understanding of God's Preservation of the Saints**

Over a century ago Herman Bavinck noted well the somewhat polarizing effect of the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. He remarked that "Pelagians, Roman Catholics, Socinians, Remonstrants, Mennonites, Quakers, Methodists ... and even Lutherans have taught the possibility of a complete loss of the grace received."<sup>69</sup> The situation remains the same today as do many of the arguments used against the Reformed view. While the traditional Arminian seems to reject perseverance of the saints based primarily upon theological rejections of particularism and the desire to protect free will, the Wesleyan and Lutheran traditions, with their respective nuances, seem to pull more from the passages of Scripture which warn of the consequences of failing to persevere, even though they do not strictly associate these with apostasy but typically with the notion of reigning sin in the life of the believer. What all these traditions have in common though is the fact that they do see the apostasy passages as proof that those who have once been justified by faith alone can nevertheless lose that status by ceasing to exert the effort required to maintain it. Additionally, these traditions accuse the Reformed view of either taking false solace in speculative extrapolations from election, or of encouraging license and antinomianism.

An examination of the actual Reformed claims, however, reveals that this doctrine is the result of careful exegesis and a pastoral emphasis which promotes a vigorous sanctification. And far from ignoring or rationalizing away the warning passages of Scripture, the Reformed have continuously understood them as one of the many things utilized by God to preserve those who believe, and to safeguard their salvation to the end. In a nutshell, the Reformed view has

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<sup>69</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4:266.

affirmed that God does indeed elect a people to himself, but that he has done so in the context of a covenant wherein he promises to love them, redeem them, conform to the likeness of his Son, and to keep them for all eternity. Thus, the doctrine of perseverance/preservation is the result of explicit promises made by God as an expression of His love to His children with nothing remotely speculative involved.

### **Elected on what ground, for what end?**

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* helpfully summarizes the biblical data surrounding this issue:

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>70</sup>

Reflecting Paul’s explanation in Eph 1:4 that “In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will,” the *Westminster Standards* and Reformed theology in general do indeed ground a good deal of the doctrine of perseverance in election but not as an exercise in speculation and logical extrapolation. All those who have come to Christ have been predestined, in love, to be His children through the work of Christ.

Examining the Scriptures to determine exactly what God has promised to his children reveals that he has established their salvation in the form of covenant promises that cannot be broken. The *WCF* references this fact above by citing “the nature of the covenant of grace” as one of the means God has established to give us “certainty” of the “infallibility” of his promises. In the era of Protestant Orthodoxy theologians often referred to the “fixity” of the Covenant of Grace to explain the unbreakable nature of God’s promises as well as the certainty of inheriting the covenant blessings because of his

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<sup>70</sup> WCF 17.1-2 , *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, Sinclair B. Ferguson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 119, 121.

arrangement of meeting the conditions on behalf of His children.<sup>71</sup> But again these are no mere conjectures but rather truths that God explicitly swears to accomplish when he explains the covenant benefits for his children.

Prophesying the certainty of these promises, God proclaims in Isa 54:10, “‘Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my *covenant of peace be removed*,’ says the LORD, who has compassion on you.” One of the benefits promised in this covenant arrangement is that God will *prevent* his children from turning from Him because of what the Spirit will work within them: “They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, *so that they will never turn away from me*.” (Jer. 32:38-40). Expounding this passage Francis Turretin explained that God “does this to teach that he will most surely bring about the execution of the covenant.” He proves this point by arguing that,

[O]nly two things could render that covenant void: on the one side a change in God’s love; on the other, the inconstancy and instability of our fear and faith. God confirms us against both dangers when he promises on the one side the constancy of his love that he may not depart from us; on the other the perpetuity of our fear. Thus now we ought to fear neither that he will desert us, but nor that we will desert him, since he promises that he will bestow both benefits; thus fulfilling not only his part but also ours and taking care that we do not fail to do our duty.<sup>72</sup>

Turretin then rightly pointed out that promises like “I will never leave thee nor forsake thee ... would be absurd and false if he suffered us to fall from faith and salvation.”<sup>73</sup>

At this point many within the Arminian tradition protest that these promises are only corporate, referring to the church and not to the individual. While there is indeed a corporate aspect to these

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<sup>71</sup> See Heinrich Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950), 581-589.

<sup>72</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 2:595-596.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 596.



covenant promises, forcing a choice between a strictly individual or a corporate focus presents a false dilemma. God promises to individuals a place within his corporate church, and swears that he will forsake neither. Luke illustrates this dual focus for us in Acts 13:46-48 when, at that moment in redemptive history, the corporate focus on the Jews began to shift to a corporate focus on the Gentiles; and yet, the passage highlights an individual element of induction into that corporate reality:

Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; *and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.*

This passage points out not only the individual element within God’s covenant but proves again the end to which God elects his children: they are “appointed for *eternal life.*” Additionally, we see from Paul’s discussion in Rom 9 concerning election, that he utilizes the individuals Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, specifying the twins, their mother, and their time of birth for the point of explaining that God most certainly elects with an individual focus in mind.<sup>74</sup>

Far from being an impersonal election grounded merely on logical calculation, God chooses those who were his enemies to become his children, through the covenant he established to accomplish their redemption for them (Eph 1:3-4). The language of fatherhood is never far from God’s legal language of covenant in this process. Christ’s own words demonstrate the pastoral and familial bond established by this unbreakable covenant relationship: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them

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<sup>74</sup> See also Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans: New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 584-586; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: vol.1, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 479-481; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 497-500; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: New International Commentary on the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 15-19. Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1893), 311-312.

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 10:27-29) Thus it was on these, and not speculative grounds, that the Synod of Dort declared that “those who have been converted could not remain standing in this grace if left to their own resources. But God is faithful, mercifully strengthening them in the grace once conferred on them and powerfully preserving them in it to the end.”<sup>75</sup>

### **Conditional upon the Believer’s Perseverance?**

As shown above, the classic Arminian and Lutheran responses to these claims assert that while God will never forsake the believer, and while outside forces cannot nullify a believer’s salvation, the believer himself has the power to reverse God’s verdict of justification on them and promises of eternal life to them. Recently, Judith Gundry-Volf has buttressed the Reformed position with her extensive discussion of the Pauline doctrine of perseverance.<sup>76</sup> Culling many pertinent passages in the Apostle’s writings she shows initially that Paul consistently promises protection from things that would cause the believer to give up trusting in God’s promises. Looking at Paul’s litany of potential threats to the faith in Rom 8:35-39, she argues that it makes no sense to think that things like famine or nakedness could steal in from the outside and invalidate God’s promises. Rather the list of sufferings and trials are factors that would cause a *believer* to doubt and possibly give up trusting in God.<sup>77</sup> Thus this list, intended by Paul to be universally exhaustive, promises that there is nothing in all creation, including the individuals themselves, that could cause a believer to defect.<sup>78</sup>

Additionally, she substantiates the case that Paul’s famous “Golden Chain” in Rom 8:29-30 proves that God elects with the guarantee of glorification and that the benefits of union with Christ all lead there in unbroken continuity.<sup>79</sup> Outside the Pauline corpus the

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<sup>75</sup> *Canons of Dort*, 5.3, Ferguson & Beeke, 119.

<sup>76</sup> Judith Gundry-Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying in and Falling Away* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-65.

<sup>78</sup> See also, Moo, 546-547; Cranfield, 436-444; Morris, 338-342; Schreiner, 456-468; Murray, vol 1, 330-335; Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1835, repr. 2009), 291-293.

<sup>79</sup> Gundry-Volf, 9-14.

Reformed have often referred to similar guarantees like 1Pet 1:23 which states: “ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” and that Christians, “by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” (1Pe 1:5 ESV) Thus if any do depart from their profession of faith in Christ, they prove that their profession was false. As 1 John 2:19 says, “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.”

The Reformed view has rightly seen God's promises of covenant love and preservation to be wholly incompatible with the conclusion that a believer has the power to extricate himself from God's grasp. Building on the Scriptures above many have argued that it is incongruous with God's fatherly love to let his children destroy themselves. Highlighting this contradiction in both the Arminian and Lutheran scheme, Herman Witsius (1636 –1708) noted:

But now, if the wrath of God could be so great towards his children, while as yet believers, as to deprive them of the faith and right of children; I would ask, after they shall be altogether wicked and enslaved to the devil, what shall bring them again into favor, that, being anew adopted and restored, they may obtain the gift of faith for, if he shall be so offended with his own children, as, for their condign punishment, to deprive them of life, and seclude them wholly from the communion of the Lord Jesus, in whom alone he can be reconciled (which yet is not at all suitable to the goodness and clemency of our heavenly Father) there can be no reason given, why he should again receive them into his favor, when they are neither reformed nor yet lament their past sins, which they cannot do without the preventing grace of God.<sup>80</sup>

Additionally, the Reformed have argued over the years that making these promises conditional upon the believer's persevering eviscerates any notion of the comfort in the promises of God. Interpreting them otherwise, argued Turretin, sets up a situation wherein “God would promise perseverance to man provided he perseveres, for this is his duty, not to be wanting to himself, which is nugatory; for to what good would he promise him what he already has?”<sup>81</sup> Since this

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<sup>80</sup> Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank (Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Foundation, 1990), 2.59.

<sup>81</sup> Turretin, 2:597.

contradicts both reason and Scripture, Turretin rightly concluded that “we say that the promise is given to the believer that he *may* do his duty, not *because* he does it.”<sup>82</sup>

### What about the warning passages?

Since both the Arminian and Lutheran rejection of the Reformed view hinges on their particular interpretations of the warning passages against apostasy, it is crucial that we properly understand them. Though it is common to accuse the Reformed view of ignoring or rationalizing away the warning passages, it has been standard in the tradition to view the warnings against apostasy as one of the many means God employs in order to keep the believer from defection. The assumption on the part of those who reject the doctrine of perseverance is that the warning passages, in order to be taken seriously, must warn against real possibilities, not hypothetical scenarios. However, this dilemma is not a legitimate presentation of the possible options, or of the Scripture’s explanation of such passages. In his masterful work on this doctrine, G. C. Berkouwer explained that “we will never be able to understand these words if we see the divine preservation and our preservation of ourselves as mutually exclusive or as in a synthetic cooperation.” Rather we must see that “our preservation of ourselves is entirely related to God’s preservation of us.”<sup>83</sup> In a similar vein Berkhof argued that there are “exhortations, urging believers to continue in the way of sanctification, which would appear unnecessary if there is no doubt about it that they will continue to the end.” However, “these ... 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”<sup>84</sup> Perseverance, Bavinck maintained, “is also not coercive, but, as a gift of God, impacts humans in a spiritual manner. It is precisely God’s will, by admonition and warning, morally to lead believers to heavenly blessedness and by the grace of the Holy Spirit to prompt them willingly to persevere in faith and love.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Perseverance*, trans. Robert D. Knudsen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 104.

<sup>84</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), 548.

<sup>85</sup> Bavinck 4.267.

Since its early stages Reformed theologians and pastors have continued to point to the events in Acts 27 as proof of the fact that the legitimacy of warnings in Scripture does not hinge on the possibility of the believer rejecting them.<sup>86</sup> Discussion revolves primarily around Acts 27:31 in which, Paul, on board a ship in the midst of a treacherous storm, states, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” However in 27:22 Paul says that that the Lord had revealed to him that “not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed.” What then is the point of the warning of 27:31 if this guarantee is sure? Is it real or hypothetical? Or as Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday put it, “Some may even ask, ‘Why should God warn people not to do something that he has assured them will not happen?’”<sup>87</sup> They reply:

[T]he questioner fails to recognize that God accomplishes his promised purposes by use of means. Paul understood this. He recognized that God’s promise included both the end (all lives will be saved) and the means (run aground on an island). Therefore Paul urgently warned that deliverance could not be achieved apart from the use of God’s appointed means.... Recalling God’s promise that was assured from God, the centurion and soldiers could imagine the consequences of failing to keep the sailors in the ship. They recognized that the consequences would be deadly. Immediately, they understood and acted to prevent their departure, lest they themselves should perish in the sea.<sup>88</sup>

Thus, the warnings do paint a real, not hypothetical picture, and have been empowered by God to function much the same way that Paul’s instructions, based upon the guaranteed promises of God, kept people safe from destruction.

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<sup>86</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 2, trans. Christopher Featherstone, ed. William Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 403; *Second Helvetic Confession in Reformed Confessions Harmonized*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, Sinclair B. Ferguson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 42; Turretin, 1.368; Wilhelmus à Brakel, *A Christian’s Reasonable Service*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2007), 1.205; Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2002), 697; Bavinck 4.268; Berkhof, 548.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 209-213.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

## Conclusion

I said at the outset that the Reformed doctrine of the preservation/perseverance of the saints is a crucial litmus test in determining consistent adherence to justification *sola fide*. As seen in the Lutheran and Arminian rejections of this doctrine, their claims of adherence to faith alone seem tenuous when God’s verdict hinges on the Christian’s ability to resist reigning sin in their life. The same holds true for those in the Federal Vision and the New Perspective on Paul movements. The Gospel itself loses its ability to encourage, inspire and comfort the Christian because they must always stand in doubt of their final destiny and ultimately of God’s love for them. As anyone would doubt the love of a parent who refuses to prevent a child from rushing into life threatening situations, so also the Christian would have every right to doubt the fatherly love of a God who would permit them, once redeemed and adopted, to then become a child of the devil.

But this is why God's reassurance of his love to his children so often invokes the permanence of his covenant promises to them and reaffirms that one of those gracious benefits is his vow to prevent them from ever ultimately rejecting him. This confidence that arises from his guaranteed acceptance of his children at the last day moves them now toward love and good deeds, because “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phi 1:6). Few have explained this better than the eminently pastoral Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635 –1711):

It is this doctrine which underscores all comforts which believers derive from the other doctrines of the faith. For what comfort can be found in the fact that one is regenerated, has been adopted as a child of God, and has received the forgiveness of sin, if he knows that tomorrow he may be a child of the devil and of hell again? If, however, along with the reception of grace, one is assured that he shall be kept by the power of God, that the covenant is immutable, and that he shall most certainly become a partaker of eternal felicity—only then will grace truly yield him joy, will he be quickened in love, and can he forget what is behind him and reach forth to that which is before him, pressing “toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God” (Phil 3:14).<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Wilhelmus à Brakel, *A Christian’s Reasonable Service*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2007), 4:296.

Hence while any who seek to proclaim the doctrine of justification by faith alone should be commended, those who consequently reject the doctrine of God’s preservation of the saints set up a tension that will debilitate the Christian and remove from them their “only comfort in life and in death.”



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