

Dispensationalism and TULIP – The Perseverance of the Saints

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We come to the final letter in TULIP: ‘P’ = Perseverance of the Saints. Again our question is not technically whether this doctrine is correct or incorrect, but whether the standard Reformed understandings of the doctrine can be sustained on the basis of dispensational hermeneutics.

Some Clarification

Much confusion arises because of the similarity of this teaching to what is known as “Eternal Security” which most dispensationalists hold tenaciously. It could also be construed as close to what is often known by the phrase “once saved, always saved.” I would like to address this well known phrase before going further.

As a phrase “once saved, always saved” would appear to state the simple belief that a saved person can never be unsaved; the saint cannot be relegated back into the ranks of sinners. The trouble with phrases like this is that they like to dress up as definitions. Another example might be “Christ’s death was sufficient for all, but efficient for the some.” And what does that mean? As it turns out it often means different things to different people. So it is with “once saved, always saved.” To many believers it is another way of saying that all a person has to do is assent to the propositions of the Gospel and they can be sent on their merry way. They’ll be seeing you in heaven no matter what kind of life they will live from now on in. Since the phrase has buoyed up the aspirations of many who think there is nothing wrong with what I just said and is intertwined with it, it is best to leave them to it and let them have “once saved, always saved” and see where it gets them.

Whether one upholds Eternal Security or Perseverance this idea of “salvation by assent” is definitely not what is meant. There are some “Free Grace” dispensationalists (I have met them) who actually do say that mere mental assent is the essence of saving faith. They often do this by confining their theology to John’s Gospel and noting that the apostle never once includes repentance as a necessary constituent of the mechanics of coming to Christ. Not all Free Grace men do this by any means, but there are too many who do! I do not think their version of salvation can be arrived at easily through the channels of consistent plain-sense hermeneutics either.

Definitions

But we are about the P of TULIP. Here are two definitions (the emphasis is mine):

The saints are those whom God has accepted in Christ the Beloved, and effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit. To them He has given the precious faith that pertains to all His elect. The persons to whom such blessings have been imparted can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace, but they shall certainly persevere in grace to the end and be eternally saved, for

God will never repent of having called them and made gifts to them... - *A Faith to Confess: The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689* (in modern English), Chapter 17.1(a).

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints asserts that God will preserve in saving faith those whom he has chosen and called and justified. Perhaps, then, we should refer to the doctrine of the **Preservation of God**, not in the sense that He needs preserving, but in the sense that He is committed to preserving and protecting and sustaining His elect people in faith and vital union with Jesus Christ. – Sam Storms, *Perseverance of the Saints: An Introduction to the Debate*

What is often lost sight of with this particular doctrine is its reliance, not just on Scriptural texts which assert the eternal security of the believer, but (and this is crucial) it's vital connection to the other points of Calvinism. The two quotations above display this connection to a large degree by their linking final salvation to the "Dortian" formulation of election.

If we pull perseverance from election we are deducing one doctrine from another; we are not letting the Bible ground each doctrine we believe. And if one's doctrine of election is defined in terms of unconditional election as per TULIP, then problems ensue for a dispensationalist. That doctrine, as we have seen, treats the elect as one people of God within the "covenant of grace," thereby ignoring the Israel/Church dichotomy of dispensationalism. This dichotomy teaches that the nation of Israel can expect future covenanted promises to be fulfilled literally in the eschaton. It further teaches that the Church is a post-ascension phenomenon that does not include within itself all the saved from Adam to the Second Coming and the Millennium. Thus, a dispensationalist cannot base preservation on such a foundation.

A dispensationalist will point to such passages as John 10:27-30 and Romans 8:28-39 to demonstrate eternal security, but these texts do not teach everything involved in the doctrine of perseverance. For one thing, they do not speak to the perseverance of the *saints*, but rather of God. They do teach eternal security, but that isn't enough for Reformed Calvinists. You will notice that both definitions above (and they are representative) explicitly tie security to effectual calling and unconditional election (these are assumed). So the question must be asked, "How does one know they are one of the elect?"

You see, that question is not asked within the doctrine of eternal security. That teaching certainly says that all true believers in Christ can never lose their salvation because it is secured by the power and grace of God. Asking, "How do I know I am a true believer?" is a different question from "How do I know I am one of the elect?" The answers to these questions are also very different. In answer to the first one might say that a true believer in Christ is a person who believes that Jesus as Son of God shed His blood for their sins, taking their just punishment upon Himself so that the sentence of God passed from off the sinner on to Christ, and the righteousness of God passed by grace to the sinner's account. Thus, a person is eternally secure because they are esteemed as righteous as God Himself through Christ (2 Cor. 5:21). Moreover, since Christ satisfied the justice of God for all the sins of the believer his eternal salvation can never again be brought into question. The issue of election is incidental to the fact of trust and need not be brought up.

But the answer to the second question cannot go like that.

The Problem of Assurance

The answer to the question “How do I know I am one of the elect?” cannot be “I believe that Christ died for my sins.” It must go further and inquire about the assurance, not just of faith, but of *election*. As the 1689 Confession goes on to say, though saints may falter, yet, “being saints their repentance will be renewed...” (17.3).

This same note of necessary repentance for the backsliding Christian is found in many Reformed writings.

Now it is indubitably true that all believers slip and fall into sin. But the truth of the matter is that no believer stays down...God picks the fallen saint up and works repentance in his heart so that he repents and continues in the Christian Life... – Curt Daniel, *The History and Theology of Calvinism*, 415.

Endurance in faith is a condition for future salvation. Only those who endure in faith will be saved for eternity. – R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 198. (See also J. Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished & Applied*, 154-155, who says that a Christian has to make continual “strenuous efforts” to examine his life to see whether he is really elect).

Notice that a person who dies in sin cannot be a Christian! He may have thought he was depending on the righteousness of Christ alone to get him to glory, but since he didn't persevere his “faith”, in the end, was not true faith.

Check the way 1 Timothy 1:18-19; 4:16 and 1 Corinthians 9:27 are often used in Calvinistic literature (e.g. read Charles Hodge on that last verse). You will discover that Calvinists often use 1 Timothy 4:16 for ministerial charges. I have twice heard prominent Reformed Baptists in the UK hold the live threat of eternal damnation over the head of an incoming pastor. I have asked myself, “if they believe there is a possibility that a pastor they are recommending to the ministry might loose their salvation, how can they hold to the eternal security of anyone?” In my course “The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the Church” at [Telos Biblical Institute](#), in a lecture on “Assurance” I play a snippet from a lecture about “Ministerial Backsliding” by A. N. Martin, where he very clearly warns his hearers at his Pastors Conference that they could loose their souls if they didn't “take heed” according to 1 Timothy 4:16.

Under such terms it is a wonder if a Reformed Calvinist can have assurance of their salvation! (I have wondered if that is the reason why they write so many books about assurance). But that is part of the package which is the 5 Points of Calvinism *as explained by their Confessions and books*.

This state of affairs introduces the issue of itemizing which sins threaten to keep one from salvation and which obedient practices maintain it (“maintain” is the apt word since one has to persevere). Often this leads to checklists whereby ones present standing can be divined. Equally often these lists exclude such besetting sins as pride, arrogance, covetousness etc. Be that as it may, I do not understand how such a doctrine as Perseverance can be arrived at through dispensational channels.

Again, just to be clear. I am not at all saying (nor implying) any form of easy-believism concerning matters of salvation and assurance. I am saying that the NT does not support this idea of perseverance but rather of God's preservation of those who embrace the Gospel and are born-again. Such a verse as Philippians 1:6 does not refer to our persevering at all.

Addendum on 2 Peter 1:10

Firstly, it should be said that this verse may indeed be interpreted to mean "make sure you are truly one of the elect." It is quite biblical to examine oneself (2 Cor. 13:5). However, I still do not believe this verse supports the notion of perseverance. Self-examination does not imply such a doctrine, and the 2 Peter passage can, and I believe should be interpreted as self-examination without requiring all the issues involved in the TULIP approach. I shall not defend my view here, but I think it is the superior interpretation.

Anyway, enough has been said for the purpose I have set myself.