

The Preservation of the Saints

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INTRODUCTION

Our topic is the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance or preservation of the saints. In the study of theology, it falls under soteriology. It is the final item in "The Five Points of Calvinism," designated by the "P" in the acronym TULIP, referring to "the perseverance of the saints." Briefly, the doctrine asserts that once a person becomes a true Christian, he never truly and finally turns away from his faith, and that he can never truly and finally become a non-Christian again. Therefore, once a person truly converts and becomes a believer, he will surely be saved.

THEOLOGICAL EXPRESSIONS

This teaching is designated by several different expressions. Although some may be better than others in that they contain more information about the doctrine, all of them are accurate, and each carries important theological implications.

Eternal Security

The term "eternal security" suggests that the believer's salvation is safe – it is not in danger, and it will not be taken away.

Although the word "security" stresses the final result, it does not tell us, by whose will, by what power, in what state, and by what means the believer's salvation is secured and kept safe; nevertheless, the word is accurate as far as it goes.

As for "eternal," if it is understood as denoting an endless duration, then it is synonymous with "everlasting," and thus emphasizes the perpetual nature of the believer's security. It is not something that will last for a while and then dissipates; it is something that will last forever.

Although some people has in mind mainly this emphasis when using the expression, its meaning becomes even richer if we also understand the word "eternal" as referring to the eternal decree of God in election. That is, "eternal" can also refer to God's sovereign and immutable decree in timeless eternity for the salvation of his chosen ones. In other words, a believer's salvation is forever secure because in eternity God has decreed the salvation of this individual.

Once Saved, Always Saved

Another popular description of the doctrine is "once saved, always saved." It clearly conveys the idea that once a person is saved, his salvation continues unchanged and uninterrupted for "always."

Again, although this description is accurate as far as it goes, it does not tell us by whose will, by what power, in what state, and by what means the believer's salvation perpetuates once it began. The description does not in itself contain any information that would counteract the false accusations that are often leveled against this doctrine.

In addition, in itself the expression is too broad to exclude unbiblical versions of the doctrine. For example, some people affirm that once a person professes Christianity, then he is "saved," and he will never lose his salvation regardless of his subsequent beliefs and actions. However, this is not the biblical version of the "once saved, always saved" doctrine.

The Perseverance of the Saints

Calvinists frequently employ the expression, "the perseverance of the saints," when referring to the doctrine.

In some ways, this expression is superior to the previous two. First, it includes more relevant information, in that it states not only the result, but also the state in which a believer's salvation remains secure. Specifically, it conveys the idea that a believer spiritually and morally persists in the converted condition. It implies that that he faces temptations and difficulties in his walk with God, but that he "perseveres" through these challenges.

This in turn counteracts the misunderstanding that one who once professes Christianity can abandon his faith and permanently return to sin, and still be saved. Instead, this expression points out that a person who has been saved remains saved in that he perseveres against temptations and difficulties.

Nevertheless, this expression still allows for misunderstandings and distortions. Although it tells us in what state a believer remains saved, it does not tell us by whose will, by what power, and by what means he perseveres. It leaves room for one to think that, once converted, a believer then has within himself the will and the power to forever persevere through all temptations and difficulties, even if he does not possess this disposition and ability before conversion. This is still not the biblical version of the doctrine. Of course, the expression does not necessitate this distortion, but neither does it directly exclude it.

The Preservation of the Saints

Perhaps the best expression to describe the doctrine is "the preservation of the saints" – it is rich in content, and biblical in emphasis.

Like all the previous expressions for this doctrine, this one tells us something about the end result, that a believer will remain forever saved. But it tells us much more than this. As with "the perseverance of the saints," the idea of "preservation" implies that the believer will truly and finally remain in the positive spiritual and moral condition that regeneration has produced in him.

In addition, it tells us that the reason a believer perseveres in his regenerated and converted state is because he is "preserved." This implies the believer's continual dependence on the grace of God, and that a believer remains saved because of the will and the power of God, and not the will and the power of man. Moreover, to be "preserved" implies that one is protected against some hostile forces and influences, and thus conveys the idea that the believer continues to face temptations and difficulties after conversion, only that God preserves him, so that his faith does not fail.

Therefore, this expression has the advantage of including much relevant information, if not by direct assertion, then at least by implication. It honors the work of God, excludes the boasting of man, and reflects the biblical emphasis on the sovereign grace and active power of God throughout the elect's salvation, from conversion to consummation.

Of course, this expression still does not say all that can and should be said about the doctrine. It does not adequately and equally emphasize its every aspect, and neither does it directly exclude all distortions and misunderstandings. Also, it does not tell us about the means by which God uses to preserve us other than the implication that it involves his active power. Nevertheless, for a short expression, this is probably the best, in that it is the most God-centered, and refers to all relevant aspects of this doctrine, at least by implication.

REFORMED CONFESSIONS

Since our current interest is the Reformed understanding of the preservation of the saints, it is appropriate to examine several Reformed confessions. These documents provide us with historical, formal, and systematic expressions of the Reformed faith. All of the following confessions contain some statements that are relevant to the doctrine.

The Scots Confession

We begin by looking at The Scots Confession of 1560. Mainly written by John Knox, it contains no section narrowly addressing the preservation of the saints; however, the following paragraphs from chapters XII and XIII are sufficient to establish a clear position on the subject:

XII. To put this even more plainly; as we willingly disclaim any honor and glory for our own creation and redemption, so do we willingly also for our regeneration and sanctification; for by ourselves we are not capable of thinking one good thought, but he who has begun the work in us alone continues us in it, to the praise and glory of his undeserved grace.

This is an excellent place to start, because it shows how the Reformed view of the preservation of the saints is integrated within the context of the general pattern of biblical soteriology. That is, biblical soteriology presents salvation as something that truly and

wholly comes from God, and that it works out in the lives of the chosen ones in such a way as to exclude all human boasting.

Because men are completely depraved and helpless, it is only by God's sovereign grace and power that the elect are regenerated – it is God who must begin this good work in us. Then, it is he who "alone continues us in it, to the praise and glory of his undeserved grace." Notice that it is he "alone" who causes us to continue, so that no credit is due to man. Both conversion and sanctification completely depend on sovereign grace.

XIII. The cause of good works, we confess, is not our free will, but the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, who dwells in our hearts by true faith, brings forth such works as God has prepared for us to walk in. For we most boldly affirm that it is blasphemy to say that Christ abides in the hearts of those in whom is no spirit of sanctification. Therefore we do not hesitate to affirm that murderers, oppressors, cruel persecutors, adulterers, filthy persons, idolaters, drunkards, thieves, and all works of iniquity, have neither true faith nor anything of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, so long as they obstinately continue in wickedness. For as soon as the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, whom God's chosen children receive by true faith, takes possession of the heart of any man, so soon does he regenerate and renew him, so that he begins to hate what before he loved, and to love what he hated before....But the Spirit of God, who bears witness to our spirit that we are the sons of God, makes us resist filthy pleasures and groan in God's presence for deliverance from this bondage of corruption, and finally to triumph over sin so that it does not reign in our mortal bodies....But the sons of God fight against sin; sob and mourn when they find themselves tempted to do evil; and, if they fall, rise again with earnest and unfeigned repentance. They do these things, not by their own power, but by the power of the Lord Jesus, apart from whom they can do nothing.

Chapter XIII continues to set up good theological reasons for integrating the preservation of the saints with a coherent and biblical view of soteriology. It states that a real inner transformation occurs in the person at regeneration. The believer then continues in his new spiritual direction because he is no longer the same as before. Regeneration is not simply a short-lived experience after which the spiritual disposition of the person remains uncertain; rather, it is a fundamental and permanent transformation caused and sustained by the Spirit of God, who now indwells the believer.

This does not mean that regeneration imparts to the believer a new power in the sense that he can now function to produce spiritual good apart from the continual grace and power of God. This Confession explicitly denies that a person produces good works by any human "free will" even *after* he has been regenerated.

Instead, it says that "the cause of good works" in believers is "the Spirit of the Lord Jesus" who dwells in us through faith, which is also a gift from God. In addition, the very good works that we perform have been "prepared for us" by God. This points out to us that God's foreordination, his eternal decree, has not predetermined only our conversion, but also our sanctification. It is not as if God predetermined that we would be saved, and then left subsequent events uncertain. Instead, he has predetermined both the conversion and the sanctification of his chosen ones, foreordaining the very good works that they would perform after their regeneration.

Therefore, just as "free will" is not an issue in conversion, "free will" is not an issue in sanctification. It is God's will that causes conversion, and it is God's will that causes sanctification, and this means that the perseverance of the saints is not subject to their own weaknesses, but to God's powerful preservation.

However, this does not deny that believers continue to face temptations and difficulties after their conversion. In fact, at times they even fall into serious sins, although even these failures occur by the sovereign will and power of God. The difference is that, because of God's foreordination and preservation, the chosen ones "sob and mourn when they find themselves tempted to do evil; and, if they fall, rise again with earnest and unfeigned repentance."

The Confession then repeats the emphasis that, "They do these things, not by their own power, but by the power of the Lord Jesus, apart from whom they can do nothing." Again, the believers do not persevere because they have a "free will" to choose good after regeneration, but because it is God's will to preserve them by his power, and he has decided that they would "finally triumph over sin." It is unscriptural to say that a man's will is under bondage to sin before conversion, but that he has "free will" after conversion. Scripture teaches that man is bound to wickedness before conversion, and that he is bound to righteousness after conversion.

It follows that those who demonstrate no real change in thought and conduct, and those who do not persevere in holiness, have never been converted in the first place. And the Confession boldly declares that it is "blasphemy" to say that a man can be a true believer and at the same time be without the "spirit of sanctification." All those who "obstinately continue in wickedness" have never been converted, even if they claim to be believers.

The Heidelberg Catechism

Second, we come to The Heidelberg Catechism (1563). Like the Scots Confession, this German catechism of Reformed doctrine contains no question or set of questions specifically designed to address the preservation of the saints. However, it includes numerous references to the doctrine throughout the Catechism, from which we can derive a definite position on the subject:

Q. 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of

his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

This first question in the Catechism introduces something new to our discussion, namely, the implication of Christ's effective particular atonement for the preservation of the saints. Opponents of the doctrine must invariably place the focus of perseverance upon the believers themselves, as if God has no final say on the matter. In contrast, the Reformed confessions agree with Scripture that God is really the only one who has any say on the matter.

Thus when we consider the perseverance of the saints, we must not deal with only what the saints can or would do, but what Christ has done and is doing. Now, by his redemptive work, Christ actually purchased the chosen ones, the elect. He bought them, and he owns them. Therefore, the Catechism begins by pointing out that the believer belongs to Christ, who protects and preserves the believer. It also points out that God has foreordained all things to "fit his purpose for my salvation," and it is the Holy Spirit who "makes me...willing and ready from now on to live for him."

For this reason, it is not entirely accurate to say that God has regenerated the believer so that he can "freely" choose that which is good – the word "freely" must at best be used only relative to sin, and not relative to God. Rather, even after regeneration, it is God who causes the believer's will to choose that which is good. Since "his purpose" never changes, the believer's foreordained destiny never changes.

Q. 31. Why is he called Christ, that is, the Anointed?

A. Because he is ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief Priest and Teacher, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be our only High Priest, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be our eternal King, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us.

This question points out that Christ is "defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us" as part of his ministry as Mediator. He intercedes for us with the Father, who always hears him. Therefore, the preservation of the elect is as certain as the permanence and effectiveness of Christ's ministry as King and Priest.

Q. 49. What benefit do we receive from Christ's ascension into heaven?

A. First, that he is our Advocate in the presence of his Father in heaven. Second, that we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that he, as the Head, will also take us, his members, up to himself. Third, that he sends us his Spirit as a counterpledge by whose power we seek what is above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God, and not things that are on earth.

Because the believer is joined to Christ in inseparable union, the ascension of Christ into heaven necessarily implies that the believer is also guaranteed a place in heaven.

Q. 54. What do you believe concerning "the Holy Catholic Church"?

A. I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it.

Again, the emphasis should not be placed upon the *believers'* perseverance, but God's powerful preservation, *causing* the believers' perseverance. Thus the doctrine cannot be attacked based on the weaknesses or the capriciousness of the creatures. It is Christ who "gathers, protects, and preserves" his elect, those whom God has "chosen for eternal life." Because of this, once a person becomes a believer in Christ, he "forever will remain a living member of it."

Q. 56. What do you believe concerning "the forgiveness of sins"?

A. That, for the sake of Christ's reconciling work, God will no more remember my sins or the sinfulness with which I have to struggle all my life long; but that he graciously imparts to me the righteousness of Christ so that I may never come into condemnation.

This question refers to the imparted righteousness that every believer receives from God because of Christ, or the doctrine of justification. It points out that the effect of justification in Christ is that one "may *never* come into condemnation."

Q. 64. But does not this teaching make people careless and sinful?

A. No, for it is impossible for those who are ingrafted into Christ by true faith not to bring forth the fruit of gratitude.

If the believer will "never come into condemnation," then the question becomes whether this leads to spiritual recklessness and moral licentiousness. It does not, because one who has been justified by God has received not only imparted righteousness, but also a new nature. He is now united with Christ as a branch is united with the tree, so that he

naturally and necessarily bears fruit that corresponds to the nature of the tree. Union with Christ results in Christ-like thinking and behavior in the believer.

Q. 87. Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved?

A. Certainly not! Scripture says, "Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolator, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God."

The previous questions are already sufficient to exclude nominal believers, or those who outwardly profess the faith without truly affirming it. To become a true believer, a person must have been first chosen by God in eternity, then regenerated and converted in history. Mere profession does not indicate election or conversion. Scripture warns us against deception: As long as a person remains an unrepentant sinner, he is an unbeliever regardless of what he verbally professes. This means that one cannot cite those who profess the faith and then fall away as examples against the doctrine of the preservation of the saints, since these have never been "saints" in the first place.

The Second Helvetic Confession

Our third confession is The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566. Like the previous two, this Swiss confession contains statements based on which we can clearly derive its position on the preservation of the saints:

XIV. The doctrine of repentance is joined with the Gospel. For so has the Lord said in the Gospel: "Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in my name to all nations" (Luke 24:47)...By repentance we understand (1) the recovery of a right mind in sinful man awakened by the Word of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, and received by true faith, by which the sinner immediately acknowledges his innate corruption and all his sins accused by the Word of God; and (2) grieves for them from his heart, and not only bewails and frankly confesses them before God with a feeling of shame, but also (3) with indignation abominates them; and (4) now zealously considers the amendment of his ways and constantly strives for innocence and virtue in which conscientiously to exercise himself all the rest of his life.

To say that "repentance" is "joined with the Gospel" means that the gospel is not preached unless repentance is also preached, and this also means that one who fails to truly repent has also failed to receive the gospel. Conversion involves repentance and "true faith," and "the recovery of a right mind." In other words, conversions involves more than mere profession of the faith, but a real inward belief and transformation.

Anyone has the physical ability to say that they believe the gospel, but unless there is true repentance, true faith, and true transformation, there is no true conversion, and the person is not a true believer. Therefore, when this person "falls away," he is not falling away from true faith, since he never had it in the first place; rather, he is only changing from one version of sinful existence to another.

But the same God who grants a believer true repentance and true faith, by granting continual repentance and persevering faith, also preserves him such that he "constantly strives for innocence and virtue...all the rest of his life."

XVI. But this faith is a pure gift of God which God alone of his grace gives to his elect according to his measure when, to whom and to the degree he wills....The same apostle calls faith efficacious and active through love (Gal. 5:6)....The same [faith] keeps us in the service we owe to God and our neighbor, strengthens our patience in adversity, fashions and makes a true confession, and in a word, brings forth good fruit of all kinds, and good works.

The preservation of the saints logically comes after regeneration and conversion, although these are all united in the eternal decree. Now, when it comes to conversion, the Reformed view is that faith is a gift that God sovereignly grants to his chosen ones. Then, chapter XVI says that this faith is not an impotent and lifeless faith, but an active and efficacious faith. It is living, powerful, and preserved by God's decree and power.

Therefore, once granted to the elect, this faith never dies, but it abides and "brings forth good fruit of all kinds." In other words, the believer perseveres because God preserves his living faith, so that even if it flickers at times, it is never allowed to completely extinguish.

The Canons of Dordt

When we come to The Canons of Dordt and The Westminster Confession, we find entire chapters dedicated to the preservation of the saints. This is not surprising, because whereas the previous three confessions were produced during the second half of the sixteenth century, these two confessional masterpieces were produced after the Remonstrance of 1610, that is, the controversy with the five articles of Arminianism.

The Canons of Dordt (1618-19) were written several years after the Remonstrance, but still during the early part of the seventeenth century; The Westminster Confession was completed several decades later, in 1647. Of course, Dordt was designed to counteract Arminianism, and after the Remonstrance, one would naturally expect a distinctively Reformed document like the Westminster Confession to boldly affirm the preservation of the saints.

Dordt not only dedicates the Fifth Head of Doctrine to address the preservation of the saints, but it makes explicit and important assertions about it in several other places in the document. We will cite several examples here:

I. Article 7. In other words, he decided to grant them true faith in Christ, to justify them, to sanctify them, and finally, after powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of his Son, to glorify them.

This article points out at least two important points for the preservation of the saints. First, it states that sanctification, preservation, and glorification are not standalone doctrines, but they are the necessary products of divine election. This is because in election, God does not decide to merely convert those whom he has chosen, but to actually *save* them. This necessarily implies preservation and glorification.

Second, Dordt recognizes that the biblical emphasis is on God's sovereign grace and power, and on his immutable faithfulness to his own decree and promise, from conversion to glorification. The emphasis is never on man's decision and response, since these are also determined by God's will and power. Of course the chosen ones must believe to be saved, but it is God who "decided to grant them true faith in Christ." And of course they must persevere to the end, but it is God who decided to go on "powerfully preserving them in the fellowship of his Son."

I. Article 11. Just as God himself is most wise, unchangeable, all-knowing, and almighty, so the election made by him can neither be suspended nor altered, revoked, or annulled; neither can his chosen ones be cast off, nor their number reduced.

Although the article is still addressing divine election, to accurately present this biblical doctrine Dordt finds it necessary to indicate that the chosen ones consist of an immutable *number* – the decree for their salvation is precise, and cannot be changed in any way. Therefore, all those whom God has chosen will be converted, and persevere to the end. Dordt places the truth of this doctrine on the very nature of God. Because God is who he is, divine election must be individual and immutable, and all the chosen ones will indeed be converted, justified, sanctified, and glorified.

II. Article 8. For it was the entirely free plan and very gracious will and intention of God the Father that the enlivening and saving effectiveness of his Son's costly death should work itself out in all his chosen ones, in order that he might grant justifying faith to them only and thereby lead them without fail to salvation...that he should faithfully preserve them to the very end; and that he should finally present them to himself, a glorious people, without spot or wrinkle.

We have already mentioned that the effective particular atonement of Christ necessarily implies the preservation of the saints, since this is what Christ died and paid for – the complete and final salvation (not just the conversion) of all the chosen ones. And so, what the Son has set out to do, he shall surely accomplish, which is to bring his chosen ones "without fail to salvation."

The Fifth Head itself is too lengthy to reproduce here – it explains and affirms in detail the Reformed doctrine of the preservation of the saints, and then makes elaborate denials against the corresponding errors in Arminianism. We will examine only several of its articles:

V. Article 3. Because of these remnants of sin dwelling in them and also because of the temptations of the world and Satan, 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.

V. Article 6. For God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election does not take his Holy Spirit from his own completely, even when they fall grievously. Neither does he let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption and the state of justification, or commit the sin which leads to death (the sin against the Holy Spirit), and plunge themselves, entirely forsaken by him, into eternal ruin.

V. Article 7. For, in the first place, God preserves in those saints when they fall his imperishable seed from which they have been born again, lest it perish or be dislodged. Secondly, by his Word and Spirit he certainly and effectively renews them to repentance so that they have a heartfelt and godly sorrow for the sins they have committed; seek and obtain, through faith and with a contrite heart, forgiveness in the blood of the Mediator; experience again the grace of a reconciled God; through faith adore his mercies; and from then on more eagerly work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.

V. Article 8. So it is not by their own merits or strength but by God's undeserved mercy that they neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost. With respect to themselves this not only easily could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen; but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen, since his plan cannot be changed, his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merits of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving

cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out.

V. Article 14. And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortation, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments.

Article 7 reminds us that spiritual regeneration is permanent, because in it God imparts to us indestructible spiritual life. Dordt repeats this point from a negative perspective in V. Rejection of errors 8. To say that regeneration is reversible is to misconstrue the very biblical definition of regeneration, distorting one's view of the whole of soteriology.

However, even some Reformed believers are confused about this point. They correctly affirm that the saints persevere because they have received indestructible spiritual life at regeneration, but they fail to consider why this life perpetuates. Because of this neglect, some almost speak as if they affirm the teaching that although salvation is obtained by grace, it is nevertheless maintained by works, that to persevere in salvation means to maintain it by good behavior.

Dordt corrects this misunderstanding by making an important clarification. Believers are not enabled to persevere by themselves or by their own will and power after conversion. In fact, "those who have been converted could not remain standing in this grace if left to their own resources." Rather, they persevere because God is "mercifully strengthening them" and "powerfully preserving them." In other words, the believer's new spiritual life is indestructible because God makes it indestructible.

This means that if a believer does not persevere, it would not be because of him, in the sense that if the believer is going to depend on his own will and power, his failure is certain anyway. That is, if perseverance depends on the believers, then no one would persevere. Rather, perseverance depends on God's preservation, and the only way that a believer would fail to persevere is if God does not preserve him, and the only way that God would not preserve a chosen one in faith and holiness is if he changes his eternal decree, which is impossible by definition.

Article 8 mentions Christ's intercession for the elect, which is part of his ministry as Mediator. Since Christ is always faithful to carry out his work as intercessor, and since God always hear him, this intercession "cannot be nullified." Then, this article also refers to the sealing of the Spirit. We will say a little more about this in a later section on the scriptural support for the preservation of the saints. For now, we will just say that the sealing of the Spirit guarantees the salvation of the elect.

As with the other Reformed confessions, Dordt is careful to note that this doctrine of the preservation of the saints does not deny that a believer continues to face temptations and difficulties in this life. In fact, it acknowledges that some believers may even "fall

grievously"; however, "according to his unchangeable purpose of election," God will never allow his elect to "fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption and the state of justification."

Finally, Article 14 brings up something that we have not yet really discussed, namely, some of the means by which God uses to preserve his people. Just as God summons the elect to conversion through the preaching of the gospel, "he preserves, continues, and completes his work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortation, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments." The people of God, therefore, would be wise to make deliberate and frequent use of these means of grace.

The Westminster Confession

The Westminster Confession devotes chapter XVII to the perseverance of the saints. Compared to the previous confessions, there is nothing entirely new here, but this chapter is to be admired for how it clearly and concisely summarizes many of the important points that we have discussed above. It reads as follows:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

Having already discussed the other confessions, I trust that no elaborate explanation is necessary. Section 1 affirms the Reformed position on the perseverance of the saints. Section 2 summarizes some of the theological reasons for such an affirmation – God's immutable decree in election, Christ's effective particular atonement and priestly intercessory ministry, the Spirit's indwelling and influence, the indestructible seed of spiritual life imparted in regeneration, and the covenant of grace. Section 3 serves to

prevent the typical false accusations and misunderstandings by acknowledging that even the truly converted may at times fall into serious sins, but they are nevertheless preserved from total and final apostasy by the will and power of God.

The Larger Catechism

The Larger Catechism, of course, entirely agrees with the Westminster Confession on the preservation of the saints both in its language and substance:

Q. 79. May not true believers, by reason of their imperfections, and the many temptations and sins they are overtaken with, fall away from the state of grace?

A. True believers, by reason of the unchangeable love of God, and his decree and covenant to give them perseverance, their inseparable union with Christ, his continual intercession for them, and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

The Catechism here stresses the perseverance of "*true* believers." In other words, some are false believers, and they will not persevere in the faith, having never even started in the faith in the first place. On the other hand, true believers are those whom God has truly converted, and these "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but are kept *by the power of God through faith* unto salvation."

The expression "by the power of God through faith" is excellent and accurate. It affirms that it is the power of God that preserves the saints, and that this is done by sustaining their faith, first granted to them at conversion.

The Shorter Catechism

The Shorter Catechism is also consistent with the rest of the Westminster Standards:

Q. 36. What are the benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification?

A. The benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification are: assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end.

Here the Catechism emphasizes the fact that preservation is one of the benefits following from justification, adoption, and sanctification. In other words, preservation is not just a mere possibility produced by justification, adoption, and sanctification, but is rather a necessary consequence, inherently included in them.

SCRIPTURAL EXPOSITIONS

Biblical soteriology, of course, does not start with the preservation of the saints, but with divine election. A truly biblical soteriology is in turn founded on a biblical view of theology proper, or the nature of God. Scripture declares that God is one who works out all things according to the counsel of his own will, and according to all his good pleasure. This becomes the controlling factor in a truly biblical soteriology, and any theological conception that contradicts this must be immediately judged as false.

As the Reformed confessions illustrate, the preservation of the saints is not a standalone doctrine, but it follows from other biblical doctrines concerning salvation. If I tell you that I have determined to reach the finish line in a race, it is assumed that I will transverse the distance between the starting line and the finish line, and that I will also jump over any hurdles in the way. The preservation of the saints is thus not a standalone doctrine, and to deny it would be to contradict not only this particular doctrine, but the whole pattern of biblical soteriology.

Thus even before we examine the biblical passages that directly support the preservation of the saints, we are already assured that it is indeed a biblical teaching, because it is the necessary implication of other biblical doctrines. The whole pattern of biblical soteriology demands it.

That said, there are numerous biblical passages that are directly relevant to the doctrine. We will list a number of them in this section. To keep this article from becoming much too lengthy, we cannot take time to examine each passage; however, we will place many of them under well-defined sections. This will make the meaning and relevance of each passage more easily discerned. Also, for most passages, we will also highlight the relevant words to aid in understanding.

Election

The biblical doctrine of election teaches that God has chosen a definite and immutable number of individuals for salvation. The other side of election is reprobation, in which God has chosen a definite and immutable number of individuals (all those not chosen for salvation) for damnation.

Just as reprobation is an eternal decree predetermining the final destiny of the reprobates, and not just their spiritual condition for an undecided duration, so election is an eternal decree predetermining the final destiny of the elect. It is not a decree to simply convert certain individuals, but to actually, completely, and finally save them. Therefore, if an elected individual could be truly converted and then fall away, it would mean that the eternal decree of election has failed, which is impossible.

Romans 8:28-39. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn

among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; *those he justified, he also glorified.*

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."

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.

Ephesians 1:11-12. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.

Redemption

Christ's atoning work is an actual and complete purchase of all the individuals for which the atonement is designed to redeem. The atonement does not only make salvation a mere possibility for the elect, but it ensures their actual salvation. This means that the atonement *guarantees* the complete and final salvation of all those for whom Christ died. Since not all will be saved, we know that Christ did not die for everyone, but only for those whom God has chosen in eternity; therefore, the reprobates are justly condemned. However, there is no condemnation for the elect, for whom Christ died. The implication for the preservation of the saints is obvious.

Christ's ministry as Mediator does not end with his death and resurrection, but he lives forever to be our High Priest, interceding for us with the Father and preserving our faith in him. Since Christ will never fail in his ministry as Mediator, true believers will never truly and finally fail in their faith.

John 6:35-40. Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still

you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me *I will never drive away*. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. 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. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

John 10:25-30. Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. 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 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*. I and the Father are one."

Hebrews 7:25-28. Therefore he is able to *save completely* those who come to God through him, because he *always lives to intercede for them*. Such a high priest meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins *once for all* when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

Hebrews 10:10, 14. And by that will, *we have been made holy* through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ *once for all*....because by one sacrifice *he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy*.

Hebrews 12:2. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the *author* and *perfecter* of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Regeneration

In regeneration, God imparts to the elect indestructible spiritual life, transforming the very nature and dispositions of their hearts. Since this spiritual life is indestructible, it means that regeneration is irreversible. Therefore, once regenerated, a person cannot then truly and finally turn away from God or denounce Christ. This means that all those who are regenerated will also persevere. Any doctrine that denies this contradicts the very meaning of regeneration.

1 Peter 1:23. For you have been born again, *not of perishable seed, but of imperishable*, through the living and enduring word of God.

1 John 2:18-19. Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. 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 3:6-9. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because *God's seed remains in him*; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.

2 John 1:9. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

Certification

As with God's election and Christ's atonement, biblical teaching on the Spirit's sealing also implies the preservation of the saints. Scripture declares that the Holy Spirit has been placed in the believer at conversion as a seal. This seal is not mere decoration, but a guarantee that the believer will reach his designated destiny, which is glorification in Christ.

2 Corinthians 1:21-22. Now it is *God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ*. He anointed us, set his *seal of ownership* on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, *guaranteeing* what is to come.

Ephesians 1:13-14. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit *guaranteeing* our inheritance *until the redemption* of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 4:30. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were *sealed for the day of redemption*.

Sanctification

In God's sovereign and eternal decree, he has not foreordained only the conversion of his elect, but also his justification, adoption, and sanctification. Just as the elect have been foreordained to conversion and thus given faith in Christ, so they have been foreordained to sanctification and thus made holy by the Spirit. In fact, God has predetermined the very good works that the elect shall walk in, and he is the cause and the power behind both *the will* and *the act* of these good works done by the elect. Therefore, the elect have been just as certainly foreordained to sanctification as they have been chosen for conversion. This means that true and final apostasy is impossible.

Jeremiah 32:40. 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*.

Philippians 1:4-6. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that *he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion* until the day of Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24. *May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.*

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17. But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because *from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.*

Hebrews 13:20-21. May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, *equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

1 Peter 1:3-5. Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who *through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation* that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Other Passages

The following lists some of the other biblical passages related to the preservation of the saints. Some of them are more directly relevant to the topic than others, but all of them support the doctrine. After reading the previous sections, you should be readily able to see their relevance and application. However, if you do not know how some of these passages relate to the doctrine, or if you would like additional information on some of them, then you should consult the standard Reformed commentaries for assistance.

Psalm 17:8-9. Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings from the wicked who assail me, from my mortal enemies who surround me.

Psalm 37:23-24, 28-29. If the LORD delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand....For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off; the righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.

Psalm 73:1-2, 23. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold....Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.

Psalm 121:3, 7-8. He will not let your foot slip – he who watches over you will not slumber....The LORD will keep you from all harm – he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

2 Samuel 23:5-7. Is not my house right with God? Has he not made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part? Will he not bring to fruition my salvation and grant me my every desire? But evil men are all to be cast aside like thorns, which are not gathered with the hand. Whoever touches thorns uses a tool of iron or the shaft of a spear; they are burned up where they lie.

Isaiah 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.

Jeremiah 31:3. The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness."

Matthew 18:12-14. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Matthew 24:24. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible.

Luke 22:31-32. Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But *I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.* And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

John 14:16-17. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor *to be with you forever* – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

John 17:9-12, 20. *I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.* All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. *None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled....My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.*

Romans 5:9-10. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him

through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Romans 11:7. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened.

Romans 14:4. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Romans 16:25-27. Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

1 Corinthians 1:8-9. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

1 Corinthians 3:14-15. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.

1 Corinthians 10:13. No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

2 Corinthians 9:8. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Ephesians 5:25-27. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

2 Thessalonians 3:2-5. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will

continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance.

2 Timothy 1:12. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

2 Timothy 2:18-19. ...who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."

2 Timothy 4:18. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Hebrews 9:12-15. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

1 Peter 1:8-9. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

2 Peter 1:10-11. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

1 John 2:24-25. See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us – even eternal life.

1 John 2:27. As for you, *the anointing you received from him remains in you*, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him.

1 John 5:3-4. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.

1 John 5:11-13. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:20. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true – even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

Jude 1, 24-25. Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, To those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ....To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

ARMINIAN OBJECTIONS

There are several kinds of objections against the biblical doctrine of the preservation of the saints. Here we will summarize the theological, biblical, and ethical objections. They do not come from only Arminians, but also Catholics. Now, although all of the following objections have already been answered in some way in the previous sections, here we will briefly but directly address them to remove remaining misunderstandings about the doctrine.

Theological

One theological or philosophical objection against the preservation of the saints is that it undermines human free will. The doctrine implies that a believer is never "free" to decide to undo his own faith and salvation.

To this, we respond that the objection is exactly right, in that the believer is never free to decide to undo his own faith and salvation. But it is a pointless objection unless man

indeed possesses such freedom from God's control. In the study of biblical soteriology, we establish from the beginning to end that there is no such thing as human free will, in the sense that man is never free from God, and that God always possesses and exercises completely control over the will of man.

This does not mean that man's will is never involved. Conversion, sanctification, and other aspects of man's salvation often involve his will. The question is whether his will is ever free from God's constant, absolute, and precise control. We contend that it is biblically false and metaphysically impossible for man to be free from God in any sense. The objection from free will thus cannot really apply to the Christianity of Scripture and of the Reformation, since they reject free will from the beginning, and in every aspect of salvation, including sanctification and preservation.

Of course, objections related to human "free will" come up not only when we are discussing the preservation of the saints, but also when we are discussing any other item in biblical soteriology. However, since free will is unbiblical and false, this means that those who affirm free will is mistaken on every item in soteriology, and this is indeed what we find with the Arminians and Catholics.

Moreover, since God has permanently transformed the nature and the disposition of the elect in regeneration, a true believer will never want to undo his faith and salvation.

Biblical

There are a number of biblical passages that command Christians to pursue righteousness and shun wickedness. Some of these passages are so strong in expression and contain warnings so ominous that some people misinterpret them as saying that it is possible for a true believer to lose his salvation. For example, Hebrews 6:4-6 says the following:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

First, whatever the passage means, it does not say that the elect will in fact renounce his faith. Let us assume that the passage is indeed saying that if one falls away from faith after reaching a certain stage of spiritual development he would indeed lose his salvation. This does not challenge the doctrine of preservation – in fact, we may heartily agree with it. If the elect sincerely and permanently renounces Christ, then he loses his salvation. However, we have already read a number of verses saying that this will never happen, that the true believer will never sincerely and permanently renounce Christ, and the above passage says nothing to contradict this. John says that those who depart from the faith have never been truly with the faith.

Second, several verses later, the writer explicitly states that what this passage describes will not happen to his readers: "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case – things that accompany salvation" (Hebrews 6:9). To paraphrase, he is saying, "Although we are talking this way, I am sure that when it comes to salvation, this will not happen to you."

Third, we must remember that God uses various means by which he accomplishes his ends. For example, although he has unchangeably determined the identities of those who would be saved, he does not save these people without means. Rather, he saves the elect by means of the preaching of the gospel, and by means of the faith in Christ that he places within them. God uses various means to accomplish his ends, and he chooses and controls both the means and the ends.

Accordingly, just because we are told that the elect will persevere in faith does not mean that God does not warn them against apostasy. In fact, these scriptural warnings about the consequences of renouncing the Christian faith is one of the means by which God will prevent his elect from apostasy. The reprobates will ignore these warnings, but the elect will heed them (John 10:27), and so they will continue to work on their sanctification "with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). Concerning the words of God, Psalm 19:11 says, "By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward."

Ethical

One of the most common objections to the preservation of the saints states that if it is true that the believer cannot lose his salvation, then this constitutes an implicit license to sin. The Christian may sin all he wants, and yet remains secure in Christ. However, the true Christian does not wish to live in sin, although he may occasionally stumble. The true believer detests sin and loves righteousness. One who sins without restraint is not a Christian at all.

The doctrine of preservation does not say that anyone who makes a profession of faith in Christ is then saved and will never be lost, since his profession may be false. Rather, the doctrine teaches that *true* Christians will never be lost. They will never permanently turn from Christ, although some of them may even fall deeply into sin for a time.

A true Christian is one who has given true assent to the gospel, and whose "sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5) becomes evident through a lasting transformation of thoughts, speech, and behavior in conformity to the demands of Scripture. John says that one who is regenerated "cannot go on sinning" (1 John 3:9). On the other hand, a person who produces a profession of Christ out of a false assent to the gospel may last "only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away" (Matthew 13:21).

CONCLUSION

Although each of the previous sections could be further developed, what has been said is enough to give us a reliable summary on the Reformed doctrine of the preservation of the saints, and we conclude that it is in fact identical to what Scripture teaches on the subject. It is both biblically accurate and theologically consistent.

This doctrine teaches us that true believers will never be lost; they will never truly and finally abandon the faith. This is because God has sovereignly foreordained their complete salvation before the foundation of the world, and because he powerfully preserves them after their conversion. After regeneration, the Spirit of God continues to work within them, powerfully causing them to strive for true knowledge and holiness.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that the elect remain perfectly sinless and obedient throughout their spiritual walk; rather, at times they may even fall into serious sins. However, the immutable eternal decree of God, the atonement and intercession of Christ, and the operation of the Spirit in the believers ensure that they will never finally fall away.

As for the reprobates, although some of them may profess the faith for a while, their profession is false and hypocritical. God has never foreordained them to salvation, but have foreordained them for destruction. Rather than sending his Spirit to powerfully work in their hearts, he hardens their hearts by a spirit of disobedience. Of course, this means that there is no spiritual life or power in them to cause them to persevere in true faith, so that they easily fall away even from the false profession by which they claim to embrace the gospel.

The Reformed doctrine of the preservation of the saints – that is, the biblical doctrine – provides the true people of God a strong and infallible source of comfort and assurance. It warns them against false professions and self-deceptions, and it allows them to biblically and realistically approach their own remaining sinfulness and imperfections.

This leads us to the related topic of assurance. The biblical doctrine of the preservation of the saints provides a legitimate foundation for the assurance of salvation. It is an assurance based on truth, fortifying their minds against oppressive doubts concerning their relationship to Christ. However, a detailed discussion on this topic, as well as other related topics (such as church membership and discipline) will have to wait until another time.