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**13 – An Anthropological Look at Eternal Life:
the Permanence of the
Internal Changes Wrought at Salvation**

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Introduction

A. Perseverance as Internal Change Wrought by the Godhead

1. Seal of the Spirit
2. Pledge of Christ
3. Gift of God

B. Perseverance as Internal Change Evidenced by the Believer

1. Effort
2. Humility
3. Assurance

Conclusions

1. A Matter of Emphasis
2. Proposed Definition

Introduction

The permanence of the internal changes wrought at salvation falls under the broader category of perseverance of the saints. There being no shortage of material on this subject, this article will focus on three theologians representing the early church and the period of the Reformation. Calvin was an indomitable defender of this doctrine in the face of the conflicting voices of medieval theology. Roman theology, which posited a works-based and synergistic view of salvation, left a person's eternity unsettled.² Reformers like Calvin

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² Calvin states that “the whole system of Popish theology will never afford even the slightest taste of true faith, which holds it as a settled point, that we must always be in doubt respecting the present state of grace, as well as respecting final perseverance” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians*, trans. William Pringle, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 160).
[Footnote continued on next page ...]

grounded the notion of perseverance on a grace-based, monergistic view of salvation. Two of Calvin's oft-quoted theologians were Augustine, for his theology of sovereign grace, and Chrysostom, for his more literal hermeneutic.

These three theologians characterize perseverance both as a work of God and as a responsibility of believers. The doctrine of perseverance is sometimes viewed as works righteousness, on the one hand, and antinomianism, on the other. According to Ján Henžel, "Because the Arminian must make his election sure by good works, it can lead him to legalism."³ On the other hand, he asserts that Protestant theologians have had "to prove that salvation by grace alone does not allow moral carelessness and antinomianism of Christians."⁴

Both legalism and antinomianism are a misunderstanding of perseverance. Mitigating against the former is the fact that these three theologians emphasize perseverance as internal change *wrought* by the Godhead. Three aspects of God's work are clearly visible in their writings, viz., that the permanence of these changes rests on: (1) the seal of the Spirit, (2) the pledge of Christ, and (3) the gift of God. Mitigating against the latter is the fact that these three theologians also emphasize perseverance as internal change *evidenced* by the believer. Three aspects of this human responsibility are also apparent: (1) effort, (2) humility, and (3) assurance. These six principles must be a part of any understanding of perseverance if it is to be balanced. The title of this article attests to such a balance. Taking an "anthropological look" implies an element of human responsibility

John Davis explains, "As understood by later Catholic theologians, the teaching of Trent presupposes that final perseverance rests neither in the human will alone nor in God's grace alone but in the combination of both—that is, 'Divine grace aiding human will and human will cooperating with Divine grace'" (J. F. Sollier, "Perseverance, Final," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*; quoted in John Jefferson Davis, "The Perseverance of the Saints: A History of the Doctrine," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34:2 [June 1991]: 219). The Catholic view finds expression in James Arminius, as well. Davis adds that, according to Arminius, "God's grace is necessary for salvation but is not alone sufficient, apart from the cooperation of the human will." Given equal access to divine grace, the human will becomes the decisive factor that distinguishes those who accept the gospel from those who reject it" (222). Ján Henžel concurs, saying, "Arminius's understanding of free will is not too far removed from a Roman Catholic understanding of God's grace helping the human will to co-operate with God's grace" (Ján Henžel, "And Grace Will Lead Me Home: Perseverance of Believers As Divine Gift and Human Responsibility," *European Journal of Theology* 12:1 [2003]: 29).

³ Ján Henžel, "When Conversion Is Joy and Death Victory: Historical Foundations of the Doctrine of Perseverance," *Tyndale Bulletin* 54:2 (2003): 145.

⁴ Ibid.

that gives outward evidence to the permanence of any inward change. Yet human effort is also grounded on the fact that inward change must be a work wrought by God in the heart if it is to be, in fact, permanent. Moreover, the Bible promises *eternal* life to believers. That, in itself, suggests that this salvation wrought by God is permanent.⁵

This article, therefore, will examine the permanence of the internal changes under the broader category of perseverance as propounded by the aforementioned triad of theologians. An anthropological examination must be laid on the foundation of divine sovereignty. Therefore, perseverance will first be expounded in terms of internal change wrought by the Godhead. Second, it will be explained as internal change evidenced by the believer. The article will then draw some conclusions regarding the respective emphases of the selected theologians. Finally, it will offer a balanced definition of perseverance as it relates to the permanence of these internal changes.

A. Perseverance as Internal Change Wrought by the Godhead

1. Seal of the Spirit
2. Pledge of Christ
3. Gift of God

Both the internal change at conversion and perseverance are a work of God from first to last. Perseverance itself is an internal change wrought by God. Each member of the Godhead is involved in the salvation, sanctification, and glorification of the individual. The work of God is expounded by Chrysostom, Augustine, and Calvin as the seal of the Spirit, the pledge of Christ, and the gift of God.

1. Seal of the Spirit

Chrysostom speaks of security in terms of a ring given to a bride. This ring, which is the Holy Spirit, seals the believer. The seal imprinted on a legal document guaranteed its authenticity and ownership. The Holy Spirit, therefore seals or secures the believer's position in Christ. Moreover, He is a deposit (earnest) who guarantees future full payment. Chrysostom asserts:

⁵ See the article in this issue by Ronald L. Rushing, "The Security of the Believer." Rushing writes, "Logically, you can't lose that which is eternal or it never was eternal to begin with."

He [Jesus] takes the sinner and espouses her to himself. And what doth He give her? a signet ring. Of what nature? the Holy Spirit. Paul saith ‘now He who establisheth us with you is God who hath also *sealed* us, and given the earnest of the Spirit.’”⁶

Chrysostom goes on to say that, while Satan caused the sinner to be cast out of the garden, Jesus plants “thee in myself, I uphold thee,” therefore, “the devil dares not approach me.”⁷ Though the devil perverted humanity into vessels of clay, the Potter “subjected the soft clay to the fire of the Holy Spirit.... He remodels and recasts them” into a “harder ware” by “the laver of regeneration.”⁸ Thus, the nature of the new vessel is changed internally by the Holy Spirit and cannot, therefore, be shattered or dissolved.

Of the church fathers, Augustine is the first to give the subject of perseverance thorough treatment in *de dono perseverantiae*. Augustine goes to great length to demonstrate that both the beginning and increase of faith is a work wrought in the heart by God. By giving thanks to God for the Ephesians’ faith, Paul is declaring that God is the One who gave that belief. And if He gave it, He will increase it and preserve it by His Spirit. Quoting Ephesians 1:13 and following, Augustine writes, “After that ye believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, which is the pledge of our inheritance.... Wherefore I also ... cease not to give thanks for you.’ ... Assuredly it is a vain and idle thing if He to whom he gives thanks did not Himself do the thing.”⁹ And if the beginning of faith was of God, surely “the increase of faith was God’s gift.”¹⁰ Thus, the Holy Spirit seals the believer so that he perseveres in faith.

Calvin concurs with this view by insisting that both the beginning of faith and perseverance in it are the work of the Spirit. He contends, “The commencement of faith is knowledge: the completion of it is a firm and steady conviction.... Both, I have said, are the work of the

⁶ Emphasis added. Chrysostom, “Homily 2: Eutropius, and the Vanity of Riches,” in *Chrysostom: On the Priesthood, Ascetic Treatises, Select Homilies and Letters, Homilies on the Statues*, vol. 9 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff, trans. W. R. W. Stephens; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 259.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Augustine, “On the Predestination of the Saints,” in *Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Wallis; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 517.

¹⁰ Ibid., 519.

Spirit... the Ephesians ... were confirmed in that faith by the seal of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹

If the Holy Spirit seals the internal changes wrought by God at salvation, then the necessary conclusion is that the work is permanent. With the sealing of the Spirit, the perseverance of the saint is guaranteed. Thomas Schreiner correctly observes that “those who are sealed by the Spirit will surely obtain eschatological redemption (Eph 1:14; 4:30).”¹² If the internal changes wrought at salvation were not permanent but were dependent upon the believer himself, then the sealing of the Holy Spirit is rendered ineffectual and is an empty promise.

2. Pledge of Christ

Nearly synonymous to this sealing is the concept of the “earnest” of the Holy Spirit, which is given by Christ as a treasure and a pledge, or dowry, to his betrothed. Chrysostom submits that believers are vessels who contain the treasure of the gospel, which is greater than all royal treasures. Since Christ has deposited the treasure, the vessel is secure. He remarks, “I [Christ] deposit the treasure: who is able henceforth to steal it? ... He gave therefore the earnest of the Spirit.”¹³ Though sinners were as a harlot to God, He took us as His bride and gave us the deposit of the Spirit, which is like a dowry of great things to come. Chrysostom calls the earnest, or dowry, a pledge that guarantees that the internal changes wrought by Him will grow to perfection. Such changes include: “immortality, praise with the angels, release from death, freedom from sin, the inheritance of a kingdom, ... righteousness, sanctification, deliverance from present evils, discovery of future blessings.”¹⁴ This dowry is not completed at conversion, but at the resurrection. But what was begun at salvation is

¹¹ John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries (vol. 21; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984): 208.

¹² Thomas R. Schreiner, “Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2:1 (Spring 1998): 43.

¹³ Chrysostom, “Homily 2: Eutropius,” 260. The illustration of “treasure” is appropriate since the pledge is, literally, a “down payment” or “deposit.” Cf. MacArthur, who puts it this way, “When a person first believes, the Holy Spirit Himself moves into that person’s heart. He is the security deposit on eternal salvation for Christians. He is an advance on the Christian’s inheritance. He is the guarantee that God will finish the work He has started” (John F. MacArthur, Jr., “Perseverance of the Saints,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 4:1 [Spring 1993]: 17).

¹⁴ Chrysostom, “Homily 2: Eutropius,” 260.

a pledge of the completion of the betrothal gifts. “As gifts of betrothal,” Chrysostom declares, “God has given us present blessings: they are an earnest of the future; but the full dowry abides in the other world.”¹⁵ The earnest given in the present (release from sins, sanctification, etc.) is given “as a proof of the remainder” (resurrection, immortality, perfection, etc.).¹⁶

Augustine likewise speaks of the Church as Christ’s betrothed spouse who is given dignity by Him and who will sigh for Him until the completion of the marriage in heaven. Until then, the blood Christ shed for His people is their pledge. He says that God’s people are called “handmaiden, for thou art the Church. But this maiden hath found great dignity with God; ... But until she comes unto those spiritual embraces, ... she is betrothed: and hath received a mighty pledge, the blood of the Spouse for whom she sigheth without fear.”¹⁷ Augustine urges Christians to remain faithful to Christ, their Spouse. Believers remain fixed in the One who gives us the earnest of the Spirit. He contends that as “members of His Spouse ... we shall securely abide in Him, now by faith, then by sight, of whom we have so great earnest, even the gift of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸

This earnest guarantees the increase of the internal changes through sanctification. Augustine speaks of the need of the “human will” to be “divinely aided in the pursuit of righteousness,” which comes about by the giving of the Holy Spirit “as an “earnest” that arouses “an ardent desire to cleave to his Maker.”¹⁹ Only an internal change of one’s sinful nature, given as a gift of the Holy Spirit by Christ, can enable such an ardent desire along with the power to pursue and persevere in righteousness.

¹⁵ Ibid., 261.

¹⁶ Ibid., 263.

¹⁷ Augustine, “Psalm 123,” in *Augustin: Exposition on the Psalms*, vol. 8 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 597.

¹⁸ Augustine, “The Epistle of St. John: Homily 9,” in *Augustin: Homilies on the Gospel of John, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Soliloquies*, vol. 7 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 519.

¹⁹ Augustine, “A Treatise on the Spirit and the Letter,” in *Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Wallis; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 84.

Calvin refers to Christ as the earnest and pledge of the covenant, without whose electing grace the people of God could not persevere. He insists:

The minds of the faithful would have always vacillated, had not Christ been brought forward, on whom the eternal and unchangeable covenant of God was founded. But they could not have had any taste of God's grace, had they not known that they had been gratuitously chosen by him. Adoption then was the foundation of the covenant; and then Christ was the earnest and pledge of the covenant, as well as of gratuitous adoption.²⁰

Christ makes a pledge—a promise. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the promises of Christ can be relied upon. Since it would violate His very character to deny His own pledge, the internal changes that are initiated and increased as a result of that pledge may be said to be permanent.

3. Gift of God

Though not as strongly as Augustine, Chrysostom does place an emphasis on internal change and perseverance as a work of grace. What God has begun in the believer by grace, He will preserve through the same grace. The benefits of this grace go beyond the changes wrought at conversion and include those that follow. Man, circumstances, the devil, and death are powerless to rob God's gifts from us. We can trust not only in the grace first given, but also in the continuance of that grace as a *fait accompli*. Commenting on the access we have to God “by faith unto this grace” (Rom. 5:2), Chrysostom writes:

If then He hath brought us near to Himself, when we were far off, much more will He keep us now that we are near.... What grace is this?... it was not only that we might have simple remission of sins, that we were reconciled; but that we might receive also countless benefits.... For this is the nature of God's grace. It hath no end, it knows no bound, but evermore is on the advance to greater things, which in human things is not the case. Take an instance of what I mean. A person has acquired rule and glory and authority, but is speedily cast out of it.... But God's gifts are not of this kind; for neither man, nor occasion, nor crisis of affairs, nor even the Devil, nor death, can come and cast us out of them.... For

²⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations* (trans. John Owen, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 10; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984): 250.

it is not only for what hath been given, but for what is to be given, that we ought to be filled with confidingness, as though it were already given.”²¹

Thus, Chrysostom sees not only the beginning of the Christian walk to be a gift of grace through faith, but the continuance therein, as well.

Lest anyone misrepresent the doctrine of perseverance as promoting works righteousness, Augustine contends from the beginning of his treatise on the subject that it is a gift granted to the elect by God. He says, “I assert, ... that the perseverance by which we persevere in Christ even to the end is the gift of God.”²² Calvin, also, contends that perseverance has nothing to do with merit or being receptive to God’s grace. He writes, “Perseverance would, without any doubt, be accounted God’s free gift if a most wicked error did not prevail that it is distributed according to men’s merit, in so far as each man shows himself receptive to the first grace.”²³ Elsewhere he maintains firmly that “we are by no means fit to do good until we are made or formed for the purpose by God, and that we shall not continue long in doing good unless he strengthens us; for perseverance is his peculiar gift.”²⁴

Perseverance, by definition, requires perseverance to the end; hence, it is permanent. If it does not persist until the end, then this is evidence that the person has never received the gift. Paul, Chrysostom argues, “shows that even before they were subverted, they were not firm. For otherwise, they would not have been overthrown.... For those who are fixed... are not harmed through deceivers.”²⁵ But where the gift is given, the person cannot risk anything other than

²¹ Chrysostom, “Homilies on Romans: Homily 9,” in *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 11 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. B. and W. H. Simcox Morris; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 396. Chrysostom’s teachings on grace notwithstanding, it must be acknowledged that he placed more emphasis on human will and cooperation with grace than did Augustine or Calvin. See Conclusion below.

²² Augustine, “On the Gift of Perseverance,” in *Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Wallis; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 526.

²³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.3.11, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960): 304-5.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (trans. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 22; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984): 356.

²⁵ Chrysostom, “Homilies on Timothy: Homily 5,” in *Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, vol. 13 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Father, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 493-4.

persevering. Augustine writes, “For, assuredly when that gift of God is granted to them, ... none of the saints fails to keep his perseverance in holiness even to the end.”²⁶ People may never say that a particular individual has certainly received the gift until they observe that the person has, in fact, persevered to the end of the course. Yet, if the gift has been given, it will persist in the believer until completion. He submits that “since no one has perseverance to the end except he who does persevere to the end, many people may have it, but none can lose it.”²⁷

How is it that the Bible implies that the gift of God may be lost? Augustine interprets such statements, not as having lost that which was possessed, but only losing what was hoped for. He contends:

Just as we say that a man who has not persevered unto the end has lost eternal life or the kingdom of God, not because he had already received and actually had it, but because he would have received and had it if he had persevered;—let us lay aside controversies of words, and say that some things even which are not possessed, but are hoped to be possessed, may be lost.²⁸

How does the human will factor into perseverance and the permanence of the internal changes given by God’s grace? Augustine’s understanding of the subject is consistent with his understanding of the sovereignty of God. God is omnipotent and merciful enough to turn a person’s will away from any temptation to fall, because He is the Giver of the gift. Once the gift is given, the believer will never fall, “because God does not allow it to happen. For nothing comes to pass except what either He Himself does, or Himself allows to be done. Therefore, He is powerful both to turn wills from evil to good, and to convert those that are inclined to fall, or to direct them into a way pleasing to Himself.”²⁹ Hence, perseverance depends neither upon one’s own works nor one’s own free will. Augustine strongly asserts that we are left with nothing wherein we may “glory as in our own, since ... our not departing from God is not given except by God.... this is absolutely not in the strength of free will.”³⁰ Calvin submits that “both will and effort

²⁶ Augustine, “Perseverance,” 529.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 529-30.

³⁰ Ibid., 530.

would immediately fail in us, were he not to add his gift of perseverance.”³¹

Augustine goes on to argue that it is God who works our conversion, therefore, it is God who works our perseverance. It is not the work of our hands, but of the hand of God. Consequently, the doctrine of perseverance rests on the doctrine of predestination. The logical conclusion is that, if the internal changes rest on God’s eternal decree, then those changes will endure eternally. He writes, “And thus as He worketh that we come to Him, so He worketh that we do not depart.... This, therefore, is God’s hand, not ours, that we depart not from God.”³² He continues, “God converts to the faith. It [the Church] prays that believers may persevere; therefore God gives perseverance to the end. God foreknew that He would do this. This is the very predestination of the saints.”³³ Calvin, likewise, grounds perseverance on election. He makes the following assertion: “Should any one object that many who have once received the word afterwards fall away, I answer that the Spirit alone is to every one a faithful and sure witness of his election, upon which perseverance depends.”³⁴ That one person is given the gift and not another, according to both Augustine and Calvin, lies in the unsearchable judgments and mysteries of God.

The internal changes wrought at salvation are a gift of God. They rest upon His sovereign and electing grace. Because Scripture

³¹ John Calvin, *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the Prophet Haggai* (trans. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 15; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984): 346.

³² Augustine, “Perseverance,” 530.

³³ Augustine, “Perseverance,” 531. Note that Augustine does not subordinate predestination to foreknowledge of what a *particular individual* will do. God’s foreknowledge here is defined as knowing beforehand what *He* will do. Elsewhere he says that “He predestinated them; for without doubt He foreknew if He predestinated; but to have predestinated is to have foreknown *that which He should do*” (emphasis added, 545).

³⁴ John Calvin, *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (trans. John Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries vol. 20; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984): 59. Cf. Calvin’s commentary on the Gospel of John in which he says, “But as he governs those whom he *elects*, all the engines which Satan can employ will not prevent them from persevering to the end with unshaken firmness. And not only does he ascribe to election their perseverance, but likewise the commencement of their piety” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* [trans. John Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries vol. 18; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984]: 63). While Augustine and Calvin ground the doctrine of perseverance in the election of God, it is important to note that not all Reformed theologians use precisely the same vocabulary. John Owen, for example, bases perseverance on the very nature of God. As Knapp points out, “Owen grounds the doctrine of perseverance in the immutability of the nature of God, his promises, covenant, and eternal purposes. The salvation of God’s elect is sure because it is linked ultimately to the unchangeable nature of God himself” (Henry Knapp, “Augustine and Owen on Perseverance,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 62 [2000]: 71-2).

promises that the good work God began will be completed (Phil. 1:6), the internal changes must, therefore, be permanent. Schreiner remarks, “All of those who are foreknown, predestined, called, and justified will be glorified (Rom. 8:28-30). Nothing intervenes to break the links of ‘the golden chain.’”³⁵ Thus, the seal of the Spirit, the pledge of Christ and the gifts of God cannot be annulled. The internal changes wrought by the Godhead in salvation cannot be revoked.

B. Perseverance as Internal Change Evidenced by the Believer

1. Effort
2. Humility
3. Assurance

The internal changes wrought by God at salvation inevitably become manifest in the outward life of the individual. As Chrysostom puts it, “Firm souls stand fixed and immovable. But whence are they manifest? From having these characters inscribed upon their actions, from their being known by God, and not perishing with the world, and from their departing from iniquity.”³⁶ It should be stated, however, that observable change itself is not the ultimate evidence. The reason for this is that change, to some extent, is within the grasp of an unregenerate heart. Such change, however, turns out only to be external and temporary rather than internal and permanent. Often, the difference is not easily discerned in the visible church. There must also be growth in and permanence of the internal changes. If the changes endure to the end and, indeed, increase along the way, then they prove to be genuine. Thus, perseverance itself becomes the ultimate proof. Nevertheless, perseverance will be evidenced along the way by the believer’s behavior, particularly in terms of effort, humility, and assurance.

1. Effort

Chrysostom’s emphasis on Christ’s promise to fulfill the pledge notwithstanding, there is still a requirement to increase in the bearing of good fruit. Security, assurance, and permanence nowhere imply antinomianism or stagnation. Expounding Colossians 1:10, he says that Christians are to “‘walk ... worthily of the Lord,’ and ‘in every

³⁵ Schreiner, “Perseverance,” 43.

³⁶ Chrysostom, “Homilies on Timothy: Homily 5,” 494.

good work,’ so as to be always advancing, and nowhere standing still, and, with a metaphor, ‘bearing fruit and increasing in the knowledge of God,’ that ye might be in such measure ‘strengthened,’ according to the might of God, as is possible for man to be.”³⁷ Yet the great effort expended in service to Christ is not one’s own work. He proclaims, “‘I labor, striving,’ with great earnestness, with much watching.... Then again, ... He [Paul] shows that this is the work of God. He, now, that makes me strong for this, evidently wills it.”³⁸ On one hand, in order for Christ to remain continually with believers, we must keep bearing fruit. On the other hand, we can only bear fruit with the help of Christ, which means that any success in perseverance where fruit is borne is His work. Concerning the fifteenth chapter of John, Chrysostom submits that Jesus “showeth that He also remaineth continually with those who shall bring forth fruit; for it is needful to enjoy His aid, and so to bear fruit.”³⁹ Hence, we may ask anything of Him (fruitwise), and He will give it.

Though Augustine emphasizes God’s predestination as the basis of the permanence of the internal changes produced at salvation, he does not rule out the use of means or human agency. God gives the gift of perseverance, but that does not mean that the believer remains passive. Though it is the Holy Spirit who changes us and moves us to action, we act, nonetheless. He states that the children of God “are acted upon that they may act, not that they may themselves do nothing.... But when they do not act, ... let them pray that what as yet they have not, they may receive.”⁴⁰ So, God enjoins prayer as a means of living obediently. Augustine submits:

Let him attribute also perseverance to the end to God’s grace, whereby he obtains mercy which he daily asks for, not to be led into temptation. But between the beginning of faith and the perfection of perseverance there are those

³⁷ Chrysostom, “Homilies on Colossians: Homily 2,” in *Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, vol. 13 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Father, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 265.

³⁸ Chrysostom, “Homilies on Colossians: Homily 2,” 281.

³⁹ Chrysostom, “Homilies on St. John: Homily 77,” in *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 14 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Father, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 282.

⁴⁰ Augustine, “On Rebuke and Grace,” in *Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Wallis; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 473.

means whereby we live righteously, which they themselves are agreed regarding as given by God to us at the prayer of faith.⁴¹

There very fact that we pray for perseverance, however, is, according to Augustine, evidence that it is a result of the gift of God. In fact, the believer needs to “understand that this is also the divine gift, that we pray.”⁴²

Though the permanence of the internal changes created by God is not a result of human will, God does not merely bypass the will nor does he force salvation or perseverance against a person’s will. A person believes and keeps believing because it is desirable and satisfying for him to do so. When asked why a person might want to become a Christian, Augustine says that he will answer, “‘Because it seemed good to me’ for the will of men is prepared by God. For it is God’s grace that God would be honoured by the saint.”⁴³ God does not send unwilling men to heaven, but, rather, “makes willing men out of those that were unwilling.”⁴⁴ Augustine states, “By the Holy Spirit their will is so much enkindled that they therefore so will, because God works in them to will.”⁴⁵ Thus, the grace of God operates upon and enables our wills in such a way that God’s work will be brought to completion. He argues that perfection depends on God’s predestination, yet, even so, “no man is assisted unless he also himself does something.”⁴⁶ Our advancement is accomplished by God’s grace “in cooperation with ourselves, through Jesus Christ our Lord, as well by commandments, sacraments, and examples, as by His Holy Spirit also; ... until wholeness and salvation be perfected in us, and God be manifested to us as He will be seen in His eternal truth.”⁴⁷ Thus, God works His eternal gift of salvation and

⁴¹ Augustine, “Perseverance,” 548-9.

⁴² Ibid., 551.

⁴³ Ibid., 546.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 549.

⁴⁵ Augustine, “Rebuke,” 487.

⁴⁶ Augustine, “A Treatise Concerning Man’s Perfection in Righteousness,” in *Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Wallis; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 175.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 176. It should be noted that human “cooperation” here is not the same thing as the Roman Catholic emphasis on synergism. For Augustine, the very cooperation itself is a gift of God’s grace, not something we add to it.

perseverance through human agency and human will. But that will is enabled by the internal changes wrought by the Holy Spirit.

Calvin also affirms the necessity of human responsibility. That eternal life is a gift does not rule out the necessity of a Christian's obedience. For Calvin, there is in the true believer an unquenchable desire for more godliness. He speaks of "perseverance combined with severe and arduous effort" and "a painful earnestness, which almost consumes all the senses."⁴⁸ Calvin objects to abusing the doctrine of assurance in an effort to justify spiritual sloth. He insists that, because "it is easy to fall away from the grace of God... we have ... need of striving and vigilance, if we would persevere in the grace of God."⁴⁹

The term "perseverance" itself necessarily involves human striving. When any emphasis on human responsibility to grow in holiness is omitted, the purpose of salvation is obscured. MacArthur correctly insists, "Any doctrine of eternal security that leaves out perseverance distorts the doctrine of salvation itself. Heaven without holiness ignores the whole purpose for which God chose and redeemed His people."⁵⁰ That both the inception and maturity of the internal changes are accomplished by the Godhead in no way undermines the necessity of exerting vigorous effort. Schreiner states, "Though God undergirds all our effort, it is still the case that we must do what the scriptures command."⁵¹ Yet, without the effectual work of the Holy Spirit whereby we are changed internally, our effort alone lacks the will to endure to the end. The evidences of genuine internal change are, after all, called fruits of the *Spirit*, not of the human being himself. Nevertheless, the fullest evidence that God has accomplished a person's salvation is found not in the inception or even the present existence of change, but in the perseverance of the believer in those changes.

2. Humility

Chrysostom understands the scriptural warnings against falling away as the antidote to pride, high-mindedness, and self-confidence.

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Psalms* (vol. 5, trans. James Anderson, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 6; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984): 4.

⁴⁹ Calvin, *Hebrews*, 325.

⁵⁰ MacArthur, "Perseverance," 14.

⁵¹ Schreiner, "Perseverance," 54.

Since all people are susceptible to falling and do fall in this life, we must remain humble and on guard. Falling into sin, while grievous, is not reason to despair of our salvation. Rather, it is reason to repent and reach out to our fellow strugglers for aid. Even Chrysostom knew his tendency to fall. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 10:12, he contends:

All of us, so to speak, having fallen, and lying prostrate on the ground... our exhortation is not concerning the not falling, but concerning the ability of them that are fallen to arise. Let us rise again then, late though it be, beloved, let us rise again, and let us stand nobly.... wherefore I beseech and implore you, let us stretch out a hand to each other and thoroughly raise ourselves up. For I myself am of them that are smitten, and require one to apply some remedies.⁵²

Augustine speaks of a lack of certainty with reference to our discernment of who possesses the gift of perseverance and who does not. Augustine does not call into question the permanence of the internal changes. What concerns him here is the degree of certainty that a believer has actually been changed. This uncertainty is, in part, a call to humility because, being wholly a gift and a work of God, “we must not boast of the most persevering obedience.”⁵³ Augustine contends:

But in this life of man, which is a state of trial upon the earth, he who seems to stand must take heed lest he fall. Since ... those who will not persevere are, by the most foreseeing will of God, mingled with those who will persevere, for the reason that we may learn not to mind high things, but to consent to the lowly, and may “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”⁵⁴

The commingling in the visible church of those who have received the gift of perseverance and those who have not serves as a warning and a call to humility. When a person falls, who, by all appearances, was a believer, every Christian should look to himself. Knapp states, “Augustine clearly thought that it was in the best interests of holiness that God allowed both ... to be together in one church. He seems to have two purposes in mind: first, that every believer would fear the

⁵² Chrysostom, “Homilies on First Corinthians: Homily 23,” in *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, vol. 12 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 135.

⁵³ Augustine, “Perseverance,” 540.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 538.

danger of apostasy and strive against falling into it, and second, that pride would not develop within God's people."⁵⁵

Calvin concurs that, though God's gift of perseverance stands, believers must not be arrogantly self-confident. The purpose of the warning passages is not to eliminate assurance, but to eradicate arrogance. When Paul warns the Corinthians (1 Cor. 10:12) who think they stand to take heed lest they fall, "he is not bidding us to waver, as if we were unsure of our steadfastness. Rather he is merely taking away arrogance and rash overconfidence in our own strength."⁵⁶ Paul, in this passage, may be putting us in fear by speaking of our weakness, "but not such a fear as to put us into confusion" regarding assurance. Instead, this fear is "such that we may learn to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand."⁵⁷

The warning passages in Scripture are real. While it is true that one who has undergone genuine internal change will not fall away, the warnings against that very thing must be heeded. In fact, it is by heeding the warnings that believers avoid falling away. Schreiner argues this point when he asserts, "It is precisely by taking the warnings seriously that we avoid eternal destruction."⁵⁸ That the internal changes in the believer's heart are gifts wrought by God does not make the warnings to persevere or not to fall away unnecessary. Schreiner submits, "Those who say that the warnings are superfluous if believers cannot apostatize will have a hard time squaring this text [Mark 13] with such a theory, for Jesus himself teaches that deceiving the elect is impossible, and he urgently warns believers to be on guard against falling away."⁵⁹ So ultimately, "We will be saved on the day

⁵⁵ Knapp, "Augustine and Owen," 84.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.22 (LCC 20:568).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.2.40 (LCC 20:587).

⁵⁸ Schreiner, "Perseverance," 53.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 57. Space does not permit a full development of this argument. Schreiner's erudite article is a must read on this subject. While he holds the Calvinistic position, he does not agree with many of the Calvinists that the warning passages are merely retrospective (a test of the genuineness of a person's faith). He does not deny that there are retrospective passages in the Bible, but only that the warning passages do not fall into this category. These passages are, he contends, *prospective*. They are real warnings. Scripture is replete with commands to persevere in and to avoid shipwreck of the faith. That the true believer will not ultimately fall away in no way renders these commands and warnings superfluous. Schreiner states, "My thesis is that the elect always, without exception, pay heed to the warnings and thereby obtain eternal life" (54). The warnings are not artificial but heeding them is, in fact, "the means by which the promise is obtained" (54). He adds, "To say that the warnings are besides the [Footnote continued on next page ...]

of the Lord, not by ignoring these threats but by taking them with the utmost seriousness.”⁶⁰

3. Assurance

The statements above raise the issue of assurance. Do the warnings against falling away due to unbelief in the Epistle to the Hebrews mitigate against all assurance? Christians are, indeed, to labor lest, having come so far, we fail near the end of the course. But how, when we become fainthearted, can we avoid such a fall? Only by the knowledge of Christ who, Himself, knows our weakness yet, as our High Priest, sustains us. Chrysostom asks, “How then [must we act] that we fall not, nor be faint-hearted?” He answers that we have a High Priest who has experienced our infirmities and, therefore, “shows that His care is greater and that He protects them as His own, and *would not have them fall away*.”⁶¹ Because of our High Priest, we may come boldly to the throne of grace for mercy in time of need, “since even *now* for those to find repentance who sin after baptism is of grace.”⁶²

However late the hour or acute the injury, God provides the needed therapy. As long as we live, we may yet return to Him in godly sorrow, which we will assuredly do if, in fact, we have undergone genuine internal change. Chrysostom writes, “Do not however despair on this account. For what if the wounds be severe? Yet are they not incurable; such is our physician: only let us feel our wounds. Although we be arrived at the very extreme of wickedness, many are the ways of safety which He strikes out for us.”⁶³

What of those who do not persevere? Any person who falls away gives proof that he never possessed the gift of perseverance, i.e., he proves not to have been a Christian in the first place. In other words, there was no permanence because there was no eternal life to begin

point and artificial if no one can commit apostasy is like saying the call to belief is a charade if all the elect will certainly believe” (55).

⁶⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁶¹ Emphasis added. Chrysostom, “Homilies on Hebrews: Homily 7 *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 14 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 399.

⁶² Emphasis original. Ibid., 400.

⁶³ Chrysostom, “First Corinthians: Homily 23,” 135.

with. Calvin remarks that John “plainly declares that those who fell away had never been members of the Church.”⁶⁴

Yet, apostasy is not merely a test of the sincerity of a person’s own faith. There is also a sense in which we cannot be fully certain that another individual in the visible church has received the gift until that person reaches the end of his life. Augustine posits:

It is uncertain whether any one has received this gift so long as he is still alive. For if he fall before he dies, he is, of course, said not to have persevered; and most truly is it said.... But how should he who has not persevered have ever been persevering, since it is only by persevering that any one shows himself persevering, —and this he has not done?... If it be thought that this also should be called perseverance, as it were for so long as it lasts, assuredly he is not to be said to have had in any degree that perseverance of which we are now discoursing, by which one perseveres even unto the end.⁶⁵

It is not clear that Augustine here denies *any* possibility of assurance to the individual believer. It appears that when he speaks of uncertainty, at least in *de dono perseverantiae*, it is in terms of the church’s observation of *other* believers. That is to say, since we are not God, we are not in a position to know with any certainty whether another believer has been given the gift of perseverance until that person has, in fact, persevered unto the end. So, this uncertainty serves both as a call to humility and a warning (as explained above).

It is a warning for believers not to fall away. Augustine’s explains:

From all which it is shown with sufficient clearness that the grace of God, which both begins a man’s faith and which enables it to persevere unto the end, is not given according to our merits, but is given according to His own most secret and at the same time most righteous, wise, and beneficent will ... To which calling there is no man that can be said by men with any certainty of affirmation to belong, until he has departed from this world.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle of John* (trans. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 22; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984): 192.

⁶⁵ Augustine, “Perseverance,” 526.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 538. Augustine speaks in the first chapter of his work on perseverance of what Christians still living say of those who have died without persevering. He also speaks of the person who “shows himself” to be persevering. These imply that he is addressing the church’s observation of others. This is even clearer when he says above, “no man that can be said *by men*....” I.e., he is speaking of the church’s (“men”) observation of an individual (“man”). Calvin addresses this as the difference between the visible and the invisible Church. John Davis writes, “While regeneration is irreversible and leads to final perseverance, in the visible Church it is not humanly possible to infallibly distinguish the truly regenerate from those who are not” (Davis, “Perseverance,” 217). Though this may be the point in *de dono perseverantiae*, Davis is correct in stating that, elsewhere, Augustine teaches that one can experience [Footnote continued on next page ...]

What preacher's call "the assurance of salvation" does not necessarily or automatically occur at the moment of conversion. Believers should possess at least a degree of healthy uncertainty so that they remain on guard against sin. Augustine calls this a "very *wholesome* fear, by which the sin of presumption is kept down."⁶⁷

Schreiner suggests that the warning passages in Scripture "provoke a *healthy* fear (Heb 4:1!), so that we are not casual and relaxed about entering the heavenly rest."⁶⁸ As mentioned above, Calvin holds that proper fear arouses one to humility before God. Proper fear does not weaken faith, but strengthens it. Calvin contends:

This [proper fear] happens when believers, considering that the examples of divine wrath executed upon the ungodly as warnings to them, take special care not to provoke God's wrath against them by the same offenses; or, when inwardly contemplating their own misery, learn to depend wholly upon the Lord, without whom they see themselves more unstable and fleeting than any wind.⁶⁹

Yet, this does not mean that the Christian should despair of all assurance. When Schreiner speaks of a healthy fear, he does not intend for this to be confused with a crippling fear. He insists that "fear ... does not paralyze us but actually contributes to our confidence.... Hearing and obeying the warnings in scriptures does not sap us of confidence and assurance. It is the pathway for full assurance in the faith."⁷⁰

Calvin maintains this distinction between healthy and paralyzing fear. Proper fear restrains pride and reinforces faith. Improper fear enervates both assurance and faith. Calvin states that proper fear is

baptismal regeneration and not necessarily be one of the elect. Such a person can fall away (see Davis, 216). Henžel, echoing J. P. Burns, distinguishes in Augustine between "two operative graces—the grace of conversion and the grace of perseverance" (Henžel, "And Grace Will Lead," 28). One may experience the first grace without the second. Only the elect receive the second grace of perseverance. In any case, that Augustine differed so thoroughly from the Reformers on the notion of assurance is not at all a settled matter. As Henry Knapp points out, "this assessment is far from universally held; numerous writers maintain that Augustine did hold a weak doctrine of personal assurance, implying that if a believer is living faithfully he may assure himself that he will persevere and hence is part of the elect" (Knapp, "Augustine and Owen," 66). Yet, the emphasis in *de dono perseverantiae* on the church's lack of certainty regarding *other* professing believers notwithstanding, it must be acknowledged that *de correptione et gratia* clearly challenges the *individual's* certainty (see especially ch. 40).

⁶⁷ Emphasis added. Augustine, "Rebuke," 488.

⁶⁸ Emphasis added. Schreiner, "Perseverance," 53.

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.22 (LCC 20:568).

⁷⁰ Schreiner, "Perseverance," 53.

“one that, so far from diminishing the assurance of faith, the more firmly establishes it.”⁷¹ He continues:

For it is one thing to restrain presumption, which sometimes creeps upon the saints from the vestiges of the flesh, in order that it may not play the wanton in vain confidence. It is another thing so to dishearten the conscience with fear that it cannot rest with full assurance in God’s mercy.⁷²

Assurance rests on the power of God to accomplish His work.

Yet, it is still the Christian’s responsibility to hope in God and pray for perseverance. Even if Augustine does claim that an individual can never have complete certainty, even he exhorts the Christian:

You, ... ought also to hope for that perseverance ... from the Father of Lights, ... and to ask for it in your daily prayers; and in doing this ought to trust that you are not aliens from the predestination of His people, because it is He Himself who bestows even the power of doing this. And far be it from you to despair of yourselves, because you are bidden to have your hope in Him, not in yourselves.⁷³

Thus, the internal changes wrought by God necessarily manifest themselves in the lives of believers.

In particular, the human responsibility to exert effort, maintain humility, and find assurance in God are evidences of internal change. Perseverance in them to the end demonstrates that the seal, pledge, and gift of the Godhead are permanent. Both the divine gifts and human responsibility are real and necessary parts of perseverance.

Conclusions

1. A Matter of Emphasis
2. Proposed Definition

1. A Matter of Emphasis

A word is necessary regarding the emphases of the theologians examined herein. A first matter of emphasis relates to Chrysostom’s view of human autonomy. Though he was a masterful preacher who made use of a literal hermeneutic and artful illustration, he posited too much confidence in human ability. To be sure, he believed that we are saved by grace through faith. Yet, often when referring to this, he was

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.22 (LCC 20:568).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Augustine, “Perseverance,” 550.

unwilling to allow the literal text to speak for itself. Instead, he consistently found it necessary to add statements insisting on the freedom of the will.

The imposing Pauline exaltation of grace in Ephesians 2 serves as an example. Chrysostom's dogged clutching to free will led him to hermeneutical confusion. He contends:

In order then that the greatness of the benefits bestowed may not raise thee too high, observe how he brings thee down: "by grace ye have been saved." ... Then, that, on the other hand, our free-will be not impaired, he adds also our part in the work, and yet again cancels it.⁷⁴

So Chrysostom would have us understand Paul as both asserting and canceling a particular claim at the same time. This is confusing at best and misleading at worst.

Another example is found in his homily on Romans 5:2 mentioned above (see "Gift of God"). Concerning the access we have to God by grace he says first, "If then He hath brought us near to Himself, when we were far off, much more will He keep us now that we are near."⁷⁵ But then he feels compelled to add, "And let me beg you to consider how he everywhere sets down these two points; His part, and our part."⁷⁶ It is not clear, however, that Paul is referring at all to "our part" in Romans 5:2.

The problem with this emphasis on free will and human ability, in terms of perseverance, is that it treads too closely to the Tridentine notion of synergism, and synergism undermines assurance. As Ján Henžel indicates, "The more participation from the sinner is demanded the less assurance of his final state he gets."⁷⁷ One's understanding of the will has a logical correlation to assurance. When theologians have been preoccupied with the notions of free will and cooperation with God, they have subsequently chipped away at the very basis for assurance.

⁷⁴ Chrysostom, "Homilies on Ephesians: Homily 4," in *Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, vol. 13 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 67.

⁷⁵ Chrysostom, "Homilies on Romans: Homily 9," in *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 11 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. B and W. H. Simcox Morris; Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1995): 396.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Henžel, "When Conversion," 130.

After Erasmus penned his treatise on the freedom of the will, Luther thanked him for hitting upon the fundamental difference between their respective theologies. Henžel remarks that “the principal difference between the teaching of the Council and Luther is the inclusion of the human will into the process of justification and indeed the whole process of salvation.”⁷⁸ He adds that it was inevitable for Tridentine Catholics to eliminate the assurance of believers because their “emphasis leaned to viewing humans as contributors to their salvation; whereas for Protestants they are receivers which gives them more grounds for certainty.”⁷⁹ This very problem plagued Arminius. Arminius, Henžel claims, “is not too far removed from the Roman Catholic understanding of God’s grace helping human will to co-operate with God’s grace.”⁸⁰

Thus, human performance rather than the grace of God is too easily made the ground of assurance. Yet, Chrysostom did not wholly deny the absolute necessity of God’s grace for salvation. He did not go as far as Medieval Catholicism, perhaps, in his emphasis on human works. Still, he did not place as much emphasis on the inability of humanity as did Augustine and Calvin.

A second matter of emphasis relates to Augustine’s view of assurance. It is not certain that he denied all possibility of assurance. Nor did he doubt that the true believer would persevere to the end. Nonetheless, he did underemphasize this biblical concept, thus contradicting his own proposition that perseverance is entirely a gift of God. The elevation of the work of God in producing inward change should have led Augustine to emphasize, not question the notion of assurance. To be sure, as long as a person is in a backslidden state, there exists the possibility that he had no real salvation of which to be sure. As John Davis writes, “A person may experience feelings of remorse for sin, make a public profession of faith, and yet not be truly regenerate.”⁸¹ Any attempt to convince such a person that he possesses true salvation could, in fact, only yield a dangerous false assurance. At such times, it behooves the one professing Christianity

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 134.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 141.

⁸¹ Davis, “Perseverance”, 218.

to examine whether or not conversion ever took place. Yet, Augustine could have said much more in reference to assurance in his lengthy discussion of perseverance.

Calvin, who greatly valued the work of Augustine, did not underemphasize this biblical concept, as did his predecessor. Commenting on 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Calvin declares:

Our steadfastness and power of perseverance rest on nothing else than assurance of divine grace. When, however, God calls us to salvation, stretching forth, as it were, his hand to us; when Christ, by the doctrine of the gospel, presents himself to us to be enjoyed; when the Spirit is given us as a seal and earnest of eternal life, though the heaven should fall, we must, nevertheless, not become disheartened. Paul, accordingly, would have the Thessalonians stand, not merely when others continue to stand, but with a more settled stability; so that, on seeing almost all turning aside from the faith, and all things full of confusion, they will, nevertheless, retain their footing. And assuredly the calling of God ought to fortify us against all occasions of offense in such a manner, that not even the entire ruin of the world shall shake, much less overthrow, our stability.⁸²

Thus, because the believer's perseverance rests on the permanence of God's grace and the changes He has accomplished, there is an assurance in which he is able to stand.

Moreover, Calvin affirms all of the foregoing aspects of permanence in this one definitive statement above. The permanence of the internal changes wrought at salvation is the work of God given as His gift ("divine grace" and "God's call"), by Christ's pledge ("the doctrine of the gospel"), and with the Spirit's seal ("seal and earnest of eternal life"). Also involved is the effort of believers ("the Thessalonians stand"), the need for humility ("on seeing almost all turning aside," "fortify us against all occasions of offense"), and the comfort of assurance ("assurance of divine grace," "not become disheartened," "not even the entire ruin of the world shall shake, much less overthrow, our stability"). The effort exerted and continuance in it, in fact, is evidence that internal change has been wrought by God. Calvin makes clear that assurance and certainty are possible in this life. He says of the Romans that God "made them more certain of their final perseverance. And that ... the gospel not only promises to us present grace, but also brings to us an assurance

⁸² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* (trans. John Pringle, Calvin's Commentaries vol. 21; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984): 344.

of that grace which is to endure for ever.”⁸³ Elsewhere, Calvin submits:

When the Christian looks to himself he finds only occasion for trembling, or rather for despair; but having been called into the fellowship of Christ, he ought, in so far as assurance of salvation is concerned, to think of himself no otherwise than as a member of Christ, so as to reckon all Christ’s benefits his own. Thus he will obtain an unwavering hope of final perseverance, (as it is called,) if he reckons himself a member of him who is beyond all hazard of falling away.⁸⁴

Chrysostom offers a literal and compelling argument for the permanence of God’s work. Augustine provides a thorough and erudite exposition of the doctrine of perseverance. Calvin, however, maintains a stronger, and necessary, emphasis on the grace of God and the assurance of His work in the believer’s heart.⁸⁵

2. Proposed Definition: Chrysostom-Augustine-Calvin View

How, then, should one define perseverance as it relates to the permanence of internal changes wrought at salvation in a way that is balanced? A combination of the Chrysostom-Augustine-Calvin view preserves an adequate balance between the extremes of works righteousness and antinomianism.

Those who are concerned that the doctrine of perseverance might encourage antinomianism can be assured that the Bible often speaks in terms of struggle, effort, waging war, and bearing fruit. It urges humility in that believers must take heed lest they fall. Yet, the doctrine also places the responsibility upon Christians to have confidence in Christ alone to preserve what He has begun in the believer’s heart. Calvin is correct to say that, rather than being a stimulus to laxity, it is “no small excitement to eagerness of pursuit” to know that God will “finish what he has begun.” It is self-confidence, not confidence in God, that “puffs them up with pride” and leads us to be “careless and indolent.”⁸⁶

⁸³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (trans. John Owen, Calvin’s Commentaries vol. 19; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984): 553.

⁸⁴ John Calvin, *Corinthians*, 61.

⁸⁵ Cf. Davis, “Perseverance”, 217. Davis asserts, “Calvin ... has greater confidence than ... the Catholic tradition before him that the believer can also have great assurance of his election and final perseverance.”

⁸⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle to the Thessalonians* (trans. John Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries vol. 21; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984): 237.

Those who are concerned that the doctrine promotes works righteousness or legalism can be encouraged to remember that the Bible clearly grounds the permanence of the internal changes in the work of the Godhead. It uses such vocabulary as pledge, earnest, seal, grace, and gift. Without the Author and Completer of faith, there would be no salvation in which to persevere; without the *preservation* of the Godhead, there would be no *perseverance* of the saints—there would be no *eternal* life and no true *internal* change. Calvin points out that, while Paul urges believers to “work out their own salvation in fear and trembling,” he also reminds them that “this very earnestness which Paul enjoins comes from God alone.”⁸⁷

The permanence of the internal changes wrought at salvation is part of the larger doctrine of perseverance.⁸⁸ For any definition of this aspect of perseverance to be balanced, it must emphasize both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of the believer. As Ján Henžel puts it, “The *Gabe* [gift] and *Aufgabe* [responsibility] of perseverance may be distinguished but must not be separated.”⁸⁹ Schreiner adroitly states:

Yes, works are necessary to be saved. No, this is not works righteousness, for the works are hardly meritorious. The grace of God is so powerful that it not only grants us salvation apart from our merits, but also transforms us. Christians are not only declared righteous but also experience observable and significant change in their lives.... Jude calls on believers to “keep themselves in the love of God” (Jude 21). The imperative here reveals that this is our responsibility. To be spared from God’s wrath on the last day we must keep ourselves in God’s love, and yet such self-keeping is ultimately not our work but God’s, for it is God who guards us from falling so that we stand before his presence with exceeding joy (Jude 24-25).⁹⁰

⁸⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.3.11 (LCC 20:330).

⁸⁸ Other aspects of the doctrine of perseverance would include a number of things, such as its relationship to apostasy, sanctification and justification, the entire *ordo salutis*, the atonement, hope and faith in future grace, etc. This paper has not attempted to cover the breadth of the doctrine, but merely to concentrate on that aspect of perseverance that relates to the internal changes brought about at salvation.

⁸⁹ Henžel, “Perseverance,” 32.

⁹⁰ Schreiner, “Perseverance,” 54. The emphasis on both human responsibility and the divine work is not an argument for synergism. Schreiner immediately follows this with a quote from G. C. Berkouwer, who says, “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. Preserving ourselves is not an independent thing that is added paradoxically to the divine preservation. God’s preservation and our self-preservation do not stand in mere coordination, but in a marvelous way they *are* in correlation. One can formulate it best in this way: *our* preservation of ourselves is entirely oriented to *God’s* [Footnote continued on next page ...]

Therefore, a balanced definition is proposed as follows:

Perseverance must be understood, in part, as the permanence of the internal changes wrought by the Godhead and those changes evidenced by the believer. Perseverance, first, is an inward change wrought by the Godhead through the seal of the Holy Spirit, the pledge of Christ, and the gift of God. Only the person who is given the sovereign seal, pledge, and gift of grace will persevere to the end. Perseverance, second, is the outward evidence of an inward change and is pursued by the believer with strident effort, careful humility, and firm assurance. Only the believer who responsibly practices exertion, humble awareness of his own tendency to fall, and a confident faith in the One who completes the work He began will persevere to the end.

This understanding of perseverance is not intended to be comprehensive. Nor is it intended to eliminate the tension between sovereignty and responsibility. As Henžel remarks, “The positive way forward is not in defusing the tension between divine grace and human responsibility [in the doctrine of perseverance] but in maintaining this tension.”⁹¹

The proposed definition, rather, is one that attempts to preserve the proper balance between God’s sovereignty and Christian responsibility in terms of the permanence of the internal changes wrought at salvation. It is well that believers understand perseverance as a necessary tension (but not contradiction) between the work of God and the responsibility of believers. This tension is eloquently expressed by way of a question put forth in the poetry of John Newton:

‘Tis a point I long to know, (Oft it causes anxious thought),
Do I love the Lord, or no? Am I His, or am I not?

If I love, why am I thus? Why this dull, this lifeless frame?
Hardly, sure, can they be worse, Who have never heard His name?

Could my heart so hard remain, Prayer a task and burden prove,
Every trifle give me pain, If I knew a Savior’s love?

preservation of us” (G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance* [trans. R. D. Knudsen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958]: 104; quoted in Schreiner, 54; emphases original).

⁹¹ Henžel, “When Conversion,” 148.

When I turn my eyes within, All is dark, and vain, and wild;
Filled with unbelief and sin, Can I deem myself a child?

If I pray, or hear, or read, Sin is mixed with all I do;
You who loved the Lord indeed, Tell me, is it so with you?

Yet I mourn my stubborn will, Find my sin a grief and thrall;
Should I grieve for what I feel, If I did not love at all?

Could I joy His saints to meet, Choose the ways I once abhorred.
Find at times the promise sweet, If I did not love the Lord?

Lord, decide the doubtful case; Thou, who are Thy people's Sun,
Shine upon Thy work of grace, If it be indeed begun.

Let me love Thee more and more, If I love at all, I pray;
If I have not loved before, Help me to begin today.

When the internal changes do not appear so obvious in our own lives, it is valid for the believer humbly to examine his own heart.

But as the late Carl F. H. Henry pointed out not long ago, there are times when we are not “day by day progressing in holiness at an always discernible pace.”⁹² At such times the permanence of the internal changes wrought at salvation is more a matter of faith than sight. But whether it is perceived by human eyes or not, the work of God is always, in His own eyes, certain and eternal.

⁹² Carl F. H. Henry, Scott Hafemann, Charles W. Tackett, and C. Ben Mitchell, “The SBJT Forum: What Are the Biblical and Practical Implications of the Doctrine of Assurance?” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2:1 (Spring 1998): 64.