

AP

REFORMED
THOUGHT
FOR
CHRISTIAN
LIVING

The Perseverance of the Backsliding Christian (Historical Background, Part 1)

By Thomas Eglinton

All Christians throughout the ages have believed that Christians can and do sin. Even men like John Wesley who held to a form of perfectionism didn't argue that all Christians are perfect – only that Christians could attain perfection. However, despite agreeing that Christians can and do fall into sin (even very serious sin), there have been disagreements on two main points:

1. Whether someone who falls away, doesn't repent and is lost was ever truly justified, and,
2. Who is responsible for recovering a Christian who does fall into sin: man or God.

AUGUSTINE ON BACKSLIDING

These questions trace their way back to the early church and so we shall begin by considering Augustine's view. Augustine stimulated questions about the extent of God's grace in his work *On Grace and Free Will*. He then had to respond to Abbot Valentine's concerns in *On Rebuke and Grace*. It seems Valentine had reported that the monks of Adrumetum responded to Augustine's assertion that God must give us grace to be saved by saying "let those who are over us only prescribe to us what we ought to do, and pray for us that we may do it; but let them not rebuke and censure us if we should not do it". These monks viewed God's work in preserving the believer as meaning that if a Christian backslides it is clearly not his fault. God didn't give them the grace to keep from sinning. In fact, they went even further to say that if a Christian is backsliding no one should tell him he is sinning and needs to repent. Augustine very clearly stated that this is not what the Bible says. To prove this, he simply quotes a few examples of Paul's instructions and rebukes to Christians who were in sin. Backsliding Christians must have the Word of God applied to their life in instruction and rebuke for that is the method that the Spirit of God uses to preserve them until the end.

Augustine's thought had nuance. He saw that professing believers who fall into sin and do not repent will not be saved

at the final day. He also understood that "none of the elect and predestinated can perish". In fact, he states that "they who are not to persevere, and who shall so fall away from Christian faith ... are **not** to be reckoned in the number of these [the elect], even in that season wherein they are living well and piously". Despite stating that those who fall away are not to be counted as elect in the final judgment, he still allows us to call professing Christians God's elect because we "are ignorant of what they shall be". In Augustine's view, such is the sovereignty of God over the lives of his elect that even their falling into sin works for their good. Even God's displeasure and punishment, described in the 1689 Confession as an impairment of comforts and graces, work to humble believers and turn them from relying on their own strength to trembling before God.

PELAGIUS ON BACKSLIDING

In contrast to Augustine, Pelagius held that man is capable of obedience because he has been given that ability by God. All men are born with this ability and so it is not God's sustaining grace which saves a man and gives him perseverance until the end – it is the God-given ability to obey. As such, if a man is found to be "doing a good work, the praise belongs to man; or rather both to man, and to God who has bestowed on him the "capacity" for his will and work, and who evermore by the help of His grace assists even this capacity". In addition, Pelagius taught that Christians are free from sin – in which case, this paragraph of The 1689 Confession that we are considering would make no sense as it deals with Christians falling into grievous sin.

Even the Semi-Pelagians who came after still taught that "the believer's perseverance in faith to the end depends on the man himself".

ROMAN CATHOLICS ON BACKSLIDING

In the Council of Trent (1545-1563) the Roman Catholic Church asserted that a backsliding Christian falls from the state of grace and needs to be "justified again" through the "sacrament of

penance” and attain the recovery of the grace lost “by the merit of Christ”. In Roman Catholic doctrine it is also stated that those professing Christians who fall into sin and never repent should not be said to have never been truly justified. That is, someone can be truly justified and then fall into sin and be lost.

REMONSTRANTS (ARMINIANS) ON BACKSLIDING

About 70 years after the Council of Trent, the Remonstrants (an Arminian group in the Netherlands) stated an even clearer form of doctrine which is similar to the Roman Catholic view. During the Synod of Dort the Remonstrants were called upon to state their *Opinions* on the doctrines discussed at Dort. They state that “true believers can fall from true faith” and that “God provides true believers with as much grace and supernatural powers as He judges ... to be sufficient for persevering”.

However, regarding backsliding they hold a position closer to confessional view (though still deficient). They held that true believers “may fall into grave sins” but do not “immediately fall out of every hope of repentance”. In fact, “we believe that [repentance] happens not infrequently”. However, they “cannot

be persuaded that [repentance] will certainly ... happen”. The major difference is that the Remonstrants held that those who do fall away may still be true believers and that it is possible that a true believer who falls into sin could remain in that sin and not be called to repentance. Chapter 17 Paragraph 3 of the 1689 Confession is against this idea. Instead it states that believers who fall into sin “**will** renew their repentance and be preserved through faith in Christ Jesus”.

Interestingly, Jacobus Arminius (the forefather of the Remonstrants) had not developed an understanding of backsliding to the same degree as the Remonstrants. He states that he “never taught that a true believer can ... fall away from the faith and perish” but states that “there are passages of scripture which seem ... to wear this aspect”.

Tom is the manager at Reformers Bookshop and an elder at Smithfield Baptist Church.