

# AP

REFORMED  
THOUGHT  
FOR  
CHRISTIAN  
LIVING

## The Perseverance of the Backsliding Christian (Historical Background, Part 2)

By Thomas Eglinton

### THE REFORMED VIEW OF BACKSLIDING

The Reformed position regarding perseverance is best articulated in the Canons of Dort. Articles 4 to 7 of the fifth main point of doctrine have many points of similarity to Paragraph 3 of Chapter 7 of The 1689 Confession. The distinctive when compared to the Remonstrant view considered above is that in the Reformed view God will certainly work repentance in any of His elect who fall into sin. The recovery of a believer from a state of backsliding is absolutely certain because his perseverance doesn't depend on his own strength but on "God's undeserved mercy". The Reformers did not negate the necessity of repentance or holiness but they did have a very high view of God's electing grace. God will not let his people fall.

### PURITANS ON BACKSLIDING

The Puritan view of perseverance and backsliding is what we find expressed in the Westminster Confession and the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith. William Greenhill is clear that "a man pardoned, and justified by faith in Christ, though he may, and sometimes doth, fall into foul sins, yet they never prevail so far as to reverse pardon, and reduce [him] to a state of non-justification". The Puritan view was far from the Roman Catholic perspective which presented Christians as falling in and out of the state of justification.

Thomas Manton expanded on the idea of backsliding using language very similar to The 1689 Confession: "It is true we lose the evidences that are in our keeping, peace of conscience, and joy in the Holy Spirit; but the estate itself is undefeatable, and cannot be taken away from us.". The Puritans weren't soft on sin in the life of a Christian – they demanded repentance. But they called the believer not to do this in his own power "but only through God's eternal power, which works mightily in him".

The most substantial Puritan work on perseverance was by John Owen and was a response to an Arminian, John Goodwin, who wrote *Redemption Redeemed*. Goodwin argued that

perseverance was the sole responsibility of the believer. This is similar to the doctrine of the Pelagians who argued that God has given men all they need to persevere. Therefore, it is up to man to exercise what God has given. Owen was firmly against this view and desired instead to place the activity of perseverance first and foremost in God's hands. "No spiritually-vital act, — that is, no duty acceptable to God, — can be performed but by the actual working of Christ". This means that a Christian who is backsliding must repent in dependence upon God (for it is God who gives repentance and perseverance), not in dependence upon their own strength to turn from sin. Owen points out that the Roman Catholics prescribe acts of repentance but they look at these acts incorrectly. Where these works of repentance "are all to be looked on as streams" flowing from the grace of God, "they look on them as the fountain". It is God who works repentance in the backsliding Christian and so a believer must repent in dependence upon the Spirit of God.

The Puritans also saw how God uses periods of backsliding for the good of His people. "Often times God's children gain by their slips, which makes them look the more warily to their way forever after that". Backsliding makes the individual as well as on-looking Christians more humble and, critically, more dependent upon God for their perseverance.

### A MODERN VIEW ON BACKSLIDING

A modern evangelical trend has been to view backsliding Christians as "carnal Christians". That is, a Christian can either be spiritual or carnal. Both are saved, but the spiritual Christian is pursuing holiness while the carnal Christian is living in unrepentant sin. Though several teachers who hold to this do call Christians to pursue holiness and not settle for "carnal" Christianity, this three-tiered view of humanity (natural man who is sinful, carnal Christian who is saved by lives in unrepentant sin, and spiritual Christian who is pursuing holiness) is not a biblical notion. The 1689 Confession articulates a two-fold division of humanity by referring to Christians

as “saints” throughout chapter 17, even in paragraph 3 when discussing Christians who have fallen into grievous sins. It is this “sainthood” that Paul so often appeals to when exhorting believers to repent (e.g. 1 Cor. 6:11).

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the ages, Christians have all agreed that there are times when professing Christians may sin. Doctrine has fundamentally differed mainly in two points:

1. Whether or not it is possible for someone who is truly justified to fall away and not be saved in the end. The Pelagians, Roman Catholics, and Arminians all agree that we should consider a professing Christian who backslides and never repents to have been at one point truly justified even though they were not finally saved. Augustine, the Reformers, and the Puritans, on the other hand, hold the doctrine that those who fall away were never truly saved.
2. What a backsliding Christian should do. The line here is

fine. The Pelagians, Roman Catholics, and Arminians all hold to human responsibility first and foremost. They don't necessarily deny any role God plays in the Christian repenting from a backslidden state, but they place the emphasis on the Christian working because God has already given all the grace that the Christian needs to persevere. It is the Christian's job to utilize God's gifts. The Reformed and Puritan view, however, places God in the driver's seat. The backsliding Christian must repent but he must exercise repentance in dependence upon the strength and grace of the Spirit of God. “For it is God who works in you both to will and to do according to his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

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