

AP

REFORMED
THOUGHT
FOR
CHRISTIAN
LIVING

The Perseverance of the Backsliding Christian

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BIBLICAL ISSUES

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints sounds wonderful. Christians will certainly persevere in grace to the end. What hope this doctrine should bring! Does this mean “once saved, always saved”? There is ample biblical warrant for the idea that Christians will persevere to the end, but there are also Bible passages that speak of Christians falling into great sin. We read warnings to Christians about repenting from sin lest they perish. How can these two ideas come together? How can Christians certainly persevere to the end while also being capable of falling into sin and needing warnings to flee from sin to escape judgment?

There are two answers to this question. The first relates to definitions: what is the Christian who will persevere to the end? The answer is “true Christians”. The second answer is contained in Paragraph 3 of Chapter 17 of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith and is summed up in the word “backsliding”. It is with this second answer that I am concerned. In this two part series, we will investigate the historical views of backsliding and, in this study, the biblical basis for the confessional view of backsliding.

CAN A CHRISTIAN SIN?

The first question we must answer from the Bible is whether or not Christians can sin. Passages such as 1 John 1:8 and 3:6 make it clear that Christians can and do sin. The fact that a large portion of the New Testament (which was predominantly written to Christians) is dedicated to exhorting the reader to keep away from sin should teach us that sinning and repenting will be a regular occurrence in the life of a Christian.

WHAT IS A GRIEVOUS SIN?

But Chapter 17 Paragraph 3 of the Confessions is not concerned with “general” sin in the life of the believer. Instead it is talking about “grievous sins” that are continued “for a time”. When the

Confessions refer to grievous sins it is not referring to murder as opposed to lying. Instead, it is referring to sins that are willful and deliberate. When we sin in an area where we know full-well what the right thing is to do, but we choose the sinful way instead, the Bible describes that sin as particularly grievous to God (Num. 14:11-12, Eph. 4:30).

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF BACKSLIDING

True believers can and do fall into grievous sins and can even stay unrepentant in that sin for an extended period of time. David is a classic example. David commits adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam. 11:4). He then arranges the murder of Uriah to try to cover up the fact that he got Bathsheba pregnant (2 Sam. 11:15). After committing adultery and murder, David remains unrepentant for what seems to be a period of at least 9 months. The child that Bathsheba bore to David appears to have been borne by the time Nathan arrived to rebuke David (compare 2 Sam. 11:27, 12:14-15). Upon Nathan’s rebuke, David does repent and does so beautifully in the words of Psalm 51.

Peter is also a well-known example of falling into sin. Bold Peter who was ready to die for Christ in Matthew 26:33-35 is denying Christ publicly three times with curses by the end of the same (rather lengthy) chapter (Matt. 26:70-74).

THE CAUSES OF BACKSLIDING

But what causes a Christian to deny Christ either in word (like Peter) or in deed (like David)? The 1689 Confession highlights four reasons: the temptation of Satan, the world, the strength of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation. Chad Van Dixhoorn points out that the first three may be seen in Peter’s denial:

“Jesus warned him of the approaching tempter, but Peter still fell under the spell of an unbelieving mob in a palace, and his heart gave way under the fear of persecution”.

THE WORK OF SATAN

Peter certainly knew about how Satan is at work to tempt Christians and cause them to stumble. In 1 Peter 5:8 he speaks of Satan prowling around like a lion “seeking someone to devour”. C.S. Lewis explores this idea in *The Screwtape Letters* where he demonstrates (through fictitious letters from a demon named Screwtape to a younger demon named Wormwood) the many methods that Satan and his angels employ to seek to make a Christian fall. Screwtape advocates for everything from distraction to self-righteousness to the corruptions of liberalism. Satan does want Christians to fall and he will do all he can to make this happen.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE WORLD

Peter was also well aware of the pressures that the world can impose on Christians. Repeatedly in his epistles, Peter warns of the influence of the world. In chapter 2 verse 12 he calls Christians to “keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable” implying that we will be tempted to not act honorably before our neighbors. Peter calls Christians to “not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you” (1 Pet. 4:12). The fiery trial clearly involves suffering (1 Pet. 4:13, 16, 19) including insults (1 Pet. 4:14). The world may mock Christians, hurt them physically, or try to deceive them (2 Pet. 2:1-3) in order to make them fall.

THE CORRUPTION OF THE FLESH

We also see Peter’s awareness of the weakness and corruption of the flesh in his epistles. He urges Christians to “abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). Even our flesh is working to cause us to fall into sin.

THE NEGLECT OF THE MEANS OF GRACE

The fourth reason for Christians stumbling can be seen in Peter’s fall as well. Before the moment of temptation Jesus tells his disciples to pray with him. “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Lk. 22:40). But Peter, due to the weakness of his flesh and mere tiredness, did not pray with Christ. Jesus “came to the disciples and found them sleeping” (Lk. 22:45). Peter fell into sin in part because he neglected prayer – one of the means of his preservation.

Samuel Waldron points out that we cannot avoid the first three causes of backsliding (Satan, the world, and the corruption within us), but we do have some control over the fourth (the means of our preservation).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF BACKSLIDING

When a Christian does fall into sin, there are consequences. These consequences fall into three broad categories. God’s view,

the effects on the Christian, and the effects on others.

GOD’S VIEW OF BACKSLIDING

When a Christian falls into grievous sin, God is displeased and the Holy Spirit is grieved.

In Psalm 38:2 David (a believer) finds that the hand of God has come down on him. God is even described as being wrathful towards David because of his iniquities (Ps. 38:1). However, God’s wrath and displeasure with his people is not God’s final view of the Christian. His anger is designed to bring about repentance and is therefore coming from a place of great love for His people. Although he may be “overflowing [in] anger for a moment ... but with everlasting love [He] will have compassion” on the Christian (Is. 54:8).

THE EFFECT OF BACKSLIDING ON THE CHRISTIAN

God’s displeasure is a heavy hand (Ps. 32:4) which makes a Christian feel miserable. “There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin” (Ps. 38:3). Paragraph 1 of Chapter 17 describes “the felt sight of the light and love of God” being “clouded and obscured from [Christians] for a time”.

But this is not all: a Christian who has fallen into sin wounds their own conscience and can harden their heart. Asaph describes this as becoming “brutish and ignorant” (Ps. 73:22). The elect will hate this state and will bemoan their own foolishness in chasing after sin. This wounding of their conscience will drive them back to the foot of the cross, seeking mercy and forgiveness.

Although God will not punish His elect in eternity, He may bring judgement on them in this life due to their backsliding. Paul describes sickness and even deaths occurring in the Corinthian church as being a judgment of God on Christians who were sinning in how they were taking the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:30-32). This punishment is not intended to destroy the Corinthian believers who were sinning but was designed by God to discipline them “so that we may not be condemned along with the world” (1 Cor. 11:32).

THE EFFECT OF BACKSLIDING ON OTHERS

“You may damn your children” and “hurt others” by your sin. Paul writes about Christians exercising their liberties without a loving consideration of their ‘weaker’ brothers in 1 Corinthians 8 verses 9-13. He states that it is possible that by this sin (of not lovingly considering the conscience of your fellow believer) a Christian can be the cause of the destruction of a fellow believer. This occurs because the weaker brother is convinced to sin against their own conscience and so stumbles. The weaker brother here is not falling away entirely (he is described as “the

brother for whom Christ died”) but one Christian’s sin is having an effect on another Christian and causing them to sin as well.

David’s backsliding demonstrates this principle in a more physical sense. After David repented of his sin, Nathan declares that he is forgiven. However, because David “scorned the Lord, the child ... shall die” (2 Sam. 12:14). At times the backsliding of a believer will cause a divorce, bankruptcy, a church split, a family feud, or any number of other earthly consequences.

All of these effects of sin are designed by God to work repentance in the believer. In fact, as we saw in our historical survey, by the mercy of God these consequences of backsliding can often be the cause of humbling, watchfulness, and a growth in grace in the elect. God’s purpose which He will bring about is the salvation of His people through faith in Christ and repentance from their sins (Lk. 22:32, 1 Cor. 11:32).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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”.

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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