

# **Chapter 5**

FIFTH HEAD OF DOCTRINE

## **THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS**

This last chapter of the Canons of Dort does not venture out on a direction of its own but maintains the stress on the work of God's grace and mercy in the life of a believer. The fact that children of the Lord persevere is not their own doing. Since God perseveres in His love for His church, His church perseveres in love for Him.<sup>1</sup>

*Will we persevere?*

But can we be certain that we will persevere in the ways of the Lord? Don't we all know people who at one time professed their faith in God, attended church regularly, read and prayed but who have "made shipwreck of their faith" and will have nothing to do with the church?

Just because someone calls himself a Christian and confesses with his lips that Jesus is Lord does not make him one of the elect (Matthew 7:21-23). Our confession in Chapter I, Article 13 already warned against rashly presuming to have the grace of election but refusing to walk in the ways of the elect. Scripture is filled with these warnings (e.g. Isaiah 1:10-20; Titus 1:16; 1 John 1:8; 2:4; 3:10). In one of His parables Jesus spoke about the seed of the gospel being sown among thorns. This refers to individuals who hear the Word, but allow it to be choked by the cares of the world (Matthew 13:22).

The Arminians believed you can never know for sure whether or not you are saved. Election is based on your decision; therefore perseverance is always an inconclusive matter. You can fall away from the Lord and lose your faith sometime during your life. Your final destination then is still hell.

In contrast the Reformed religion maintains that those whom God has chosen will persevere to the end. This is not their own doing; it is because of Christ their Anchor. As Charles Spurgeon put it, "a man on board ship may be knocked down on the deck by the waves again and again, but he is never washed overboard".<sup>2</sup> Perseverance does not mean Christians will have an easy time on this earth. The Reformed

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faith does not foster a "just-grin-and-praise-the-Lord" mentality. We believe the Lord our God will stay with us even when we err or want to quit when the demands of faith seem too great.

### *Perseverance as running a race*

Believers do not simply stand on the road to the new earth, waiting for Christ's return, but they walk in the ways of the Lord (Jeremiah 6:16; Micah 6:8) and run the race of faith. Hebrews 12:1-3 states, *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"*. This passage helps us understand the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

The first thing the author to the Hebrews teaches us is that we are not the only ones called to run the race of faith or to persevere. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses in the stadium of faith. These witnesses are different from the fans in a hockey arena or baseball stadium. They are not spectators who watch us sweat it out and who will "boo" or throw pop cans at us if we don't do well. The great cloud of witnesses have run the race themselves. They can attest to the fact that it is possible to endure to the end. The LORD selects a certain number of people out of the human race to run the race of faith.

Secondly, Hebrews 12 makes us realize no one can persevere through their own exertion or strength. Hebrews 11 gives us a rundown of all those long distance runners who endured through faith -- through an obedient response to the Word of God. Perseverance in the race compels children of God to be steadfast, holding to the Word as a norm for daily living. Thus Noah built the ark when the whole world mocked and laughed. He built in response to what God instructed him to do. He did not say, "Lord, what am I to do with such a big

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boat in my backyard"? He did not question the Lord's ways but he built against all odds. Similarly, Abraham believed the Word of God. Therefore he went to an unknown country. He lived in Canaan as a stranger. The only piece of land he owned was a grave. Nevertheless, he believed the sure promises of His covenant God.

As we run the race of faith we are encouraged to keep going because the Lord will cause us to persevere. He will see to it that one day we too will be included in that cloud of witnesses.

One final comment is in place. To endure in the race of faith we need to know *what* we believe. Perseverance is as much a matter of doctrine as it is of conduct. Our behaviour is formed and shaped by the teachings of the Holy Gospel.

### ARTICLE 1: THE REGENERATE NOT FREE FROM INDWELLING SIN

Those whom God according to His purpose calls into the fellowship of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and regenerates by His Holy Spirit, He certainly sets free from the dominion and slavery of sin, but not entirely in this life from the flesh and the body of sin.

#### *The unity of the Canons*

The fifth chapter begins by summarizing the doctrines stated in the previous chapters. "Those whom God according to His purpose calls (chapter I) into the fellowship of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, (chapter II) and regenerates by His Holy Spirit (chapter III/IV)..."

The secret of our perseverance lies in the Lord's changeless, invariable and definite purpose. To say it differently: the God who elects is also the God who causes the saints to persevere. Take away the doctrine of election and the doctrine of the perseverance of the

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saints falls to the ground. The perseverance of the saints is a fruit of election. Those whom the Lord calls He also glorifies (Romans 8:30). Jesus came from heaven to fulfil the purpose and will of God keeping those called from before the foundation of the earth. As our Lord states in John 6:39, "*And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given me, but raise it up at the last day*".

In contrast to human beings, who are often filled with good intentions that are not accomplished, the Lord fulfils what He sets out to do. There is no breakdown in the purpose or work of God. Several passages of Scripture apply here: John 10:27,28, "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand*"; Philippians 1:6, "*And I am sure that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*".

### *Who are the saints?*

The wording of the first article not only links this chapter with previous ones, but it also provides us with a careful description of a saint. A saint is one called by God, according to His purpose. A person isn't a saint because of what he has done but because God has chosen him (Romans 1:7). Saints are those called by God into the fellowship of His Son. They have a bond with Christ and, through Him, with fellow members of His body. Moreover, saints are also those who the Spirit regenerates.<sup>3</sup>

### *Set free from the dominion and slavery of sin*

These saints are set free from the dominion and slavery of sin. Sin is a cruel taskmaster and tyrant. No individual has the power to free himself from the bondage of sin. Yet sin has met its match in Christ. He breaks the power of sin. By being set free we are given a new master whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light.<sup>4</sup> To say it with the comforting words of Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism, "I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and

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in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil".

Christ became incarnate to free us from the dominion of sin and the devil. On this topic the author to the Hebrews writes, "*Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage*" (Hebrews 2:14,15).

The dominion of sin causes us to become slaves to sin, which is what makes so many sins addictive. Christ also breaks the slavery of sin. "*Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not continue in the house forever; the son continues for ever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed'*" (John 8:34-36). We are set free from the slavery of sin through His crucifixion. Paul writes in Romans 6:6, "*We know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin*". Thanks to the glorious work of Christ Jesus our Lord we are set on a new course.

### *Set free ...but not completely*

Sin does not reign over believers. Yet there is a daily struggle. Even though children of God do not live in sin they do fall into sin. The Lord's plan of salvation is brought to completion through a process of struggle and triumph. He permits sin to manifest its power in order that He might show the wonder and greatness of our victory in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Both the Confessions and liturgical forms, used in Reformed Churches since the 16th century, teach emphatically that we are still sinful. For example, Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism

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speaks about the forgiveness of those sins "against which I have to struggle all my life" and Lord's Day 23 says I "am still inclined to all evil". The Form for the Baptism of Infants reads, "And if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins, we must not despair of God's mercy nor continue in sin..."<sup>6</sup> and the Lord's Supper says, "but all this, beloved brothers and sisters, is not meant to discourage broken and contrite hearts, as if only those who are without sin may come to the table of the Lord. For we do not come to this supper to declare that we are perfect and righteous in ourselves".<sup>7</sup> Believers will have to struggle against sin throughout their entire life (1 Corinthians 15:24,25; Revelation 6:10,11).

### ARTICLE 2: DAILY SINS OF WEAKNESS

Therefore daily sins of weakness spring up and defects cling to even the best works of the saints. These are for them a constant reason to humble themselves before God, to flee to the crucified Christ, to put the flesh to death more and more through the Spirit of prayer and by holy exercises of godliness, and to long and strive for the goal of perfection until at last, delivered from this body of death, they reign with the Lamb of God in heaven.

Daily sins of weakness and defects cling to the best works of the saints. "*We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment* (Isaiah 64:6). To confess this is not a loop-hole, allowing us to continue in the sins from which we don't want to break. Nor do the terms "weakness" and "defect" diminish the seriousness of sin. The Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper explains our remaining weakness very accurately when it states, "We also are aware of our many sins and shortcomings. We do not have perfect faith and we do not serve God with such zeal as He requires. Daily we have to contend with the weakness of our faith and with the evil desires of our flesh". Our faith in God is not perfect and our zeal for the Lord's service is not always what it ought to be.

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Even the holiest person has only a small beginning of required obedience.

Daily sins of weakness include bad habits, arrogance, haughtiness, false humility, pride, disdain of others, not telling the whole truth, sinful desires, slandering, the unloving way in which we deal with fellow members of the body of Christ, etc. Even our best works, such as prayer and worship on the Lord's Day, are filled with sins of weakness and defects. Sometimes our prayers can be self-centred. Our thoughts wander as we are speaking. We may be listening to sermons in a wrong frame of mind.<sup>8</sup>

### *The three-fold result of sins of weakness*

These sins of weakness have a three-fold result. First, they make believers humble themselves before God. It brings them on their knees before the Lord. They pray, "*Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions; according to thy steadfast love remember me, for thy goodness' sake, O LORD*" (Psalm 25:7).

Secondly, our sins and defects cause us to flee (for refuge) to the crucified Christ. Sometimes people are more troubled by the consequences of sin (the impact and repercussions of being caught) than they are by sin itself. But the Word of God teaches us to deal with sin itself and to flee to no one else but Christ for help. Jesus Christ is our security and safety. In Him we find a place to hide. He protects us against all our enemies.

The third result is that our flesh must be put to death through the Spirit (Romans 8:24). In this regard the greatest weapon we have is prayer. Putting on the whole armour of God we are told, "*Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel...*" (Ephesians 6:18,19).



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The Spirit uses prayer *and* holy exercises of godliness to put to death the flesh (Galatians 5:24; 1 Timothy 4:7,8). Just as you need physical exercise to stay fit you need spiritual exercise to stay "fit" for the race of faith. Fitness and staying in shape does not come easily. It requires training, good eating habits and exercise. The same is true of staying fit in faith.

Godliness is to direct all our life toward God. It is to show reverence to the Lord, to respect His Word and to hold to sound doctrine. Godliness transforms our attitude, our outlook on life and our involvement in the communion of saints. It is developed through good habits (such as personal and family devotions) and training in the Word (hearing the Word, meditating upon it, Bible Study etc). We will be able to get more work done and we will be more fruitful in serving the Lord when we carry out holy exercises of godliness.

Finally we put to death our flesh by longing for the goal of perfection. This longing is similar to that of a woman expecting a baby. A mother looks forward to the day the discomfort of the pregnancy and pain of labour and delivery have past. Together with all of creation we long for the day when sin and its consequences are a thing of the past.

### **ARTICLE 3: GOD PRESERVES HIS OWN**

Because of these remnants of indwelling sin and also because of the temptations of the world and of Satan, those who have been converted could not remain standing in that grace if left to their own strength. But God is faithful, who mercifully confirms them in the grace once conferred upon them and powerfully preserves them in that grace to the end.

Article 3 expresses the certainty and joy of believers. The saints will persevere because God preserves them. Those who have been converted could not remain standing if left on their own. Left to

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themselves believers are not only *unwilling* to stand but also *unable* to stand.<sup>9</sup> As soon as a person thinks "I can handle it" he is treading on very dangerous ground. He who overestimates his own abilities underestimates his own sinfulness and the power and influence of Satan's realm.

The secret of our strength does not lie in ourselves, or in isolating ourselves from the world, but has its roots in the grace of God. The Lord confers, confirms and preserves us in grace. This article states three reasons why children of the Lord could not remain standing in grace if left to themselves: because of the remnants of indwelling sins, because of the temptations of the world and because of Satan.

### *Remnants of Indwelling Sins*

Backsliding and reverting to sinful ways is a danger every Christian faces because of indwelling sins that remain with us all our life. Sin dwells in our hearts as an unwanted guest.<sup>10</sup> Though we would like to serve God perfectly, evil lies close at hand and we end up doing what we hate. "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it*" (Romans 7:15,18).

The fact that the "spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" cannot be used as an excuse. Instead it should be seen as a great accusation against us. The evil desires of the flesh are still so much with us.

### *Temptations of the world*

Christians are also faced with the temptations of the world. The world is the equivalent of "the kingdom of darkness". This kingdom includes everything which opposes the progress of the kingdom of God. False religion, secularism, humanism, materialism are a few examples of those things which belong to the world. Not all "things" of the world are wrong in themselves but to set our hearts on them is evil. The things of the world pass away and therefore John writes

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in his first letter, "*Do not love the world or the things in the world*" (1 John 2:15). We are to set our hearts on the things that are above.

Our sinful hearts want to conform to the ways of an evil world. By nature we don't want to be out of step with the rest of society in the way we speak, dress, work and live. Therefore we are admonished, "*Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect*" (Romans 12:2).

When we love God and keep His commandments we cannot have a love for the world for "*...whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*" (James 4:4). For this reason the apostle Paul was greatly disturbed by colleagues and followers who left him because of their love for the world (2 Timothy 4:10).

### ***Satan***

Satan uses temptation to play on our weaknesses. He checks out places where he can best attack us. If the devil sees we have our guard down he is sure to launch an assault. The devil would love to see us grow weary, tired and ready to give up. He tries to poke holes in our faith and commitment to the Lord. Frequently he "*disguises himself as an angel of light*" (2 Corinthians 11:14).

Article 12 of the Belgic Confession says the devil and evil spirits "are so depraved that they are enemies of God and of all that is good. With all their might, they lie in wait like murderers to ruin the Church and all its members and to destroy everything by their wicked devices".

### ***God is faithful***

But God is faithful and will sustain us to the end (1 Corinthians 1:8,9) strengthening and guarding us from evil (2 Thessalonians 3:3). He will conquer all His enemies and cause His saints to triumph. The apostle Peter concludes his letter by reminding his readers of the

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faithfulness of God when he writes, "*And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, establish, and strengthen you*" (1 Peter 5:10). There is no ground for security in ourselves. We must rely completely and fully on the faithfulness of the Lord our God. For "*I am sure that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 1:6). The power of God whereby He keeps believers in His grace will not be overpowered or weakened by the strength of the flesh, Satan or the world (1 John 4:4).

The faithfulness of God is the basic foundation of the Christian religion. The Lord is faithful to His covenant promises. He powerfully preserves us in His grace by granting us spiritual weapons (Ephesians 6:11). Giving us the equipment to stand He commands us to repent, believe and fight.

God is faithful even though His sons and daughters can be very unfaithful. The next article will go into that in further detail.

### ARTICLE 4: SAINTS MAY FALL INTO SERIOUS SINS

Although the power of God whereby He confirms and preserves true believers in grace is so great that it cannot be conquered by the flesh, yet the converted are not always so led and moved by God that they cannot in certain particular actions turn aside through their own fault from the guidance of grace and be seduced by and yield to the lusts of the flesh. They must therefore constantly watch and pray that they may not be led into temptation. When they do not watch and pray, they not only can be drawn away by the flesh, the world, and Satan into serious and atrocious sins, but with the righteous permission of God are sometimes actually drawn away. The lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints, described in Holy Scripture, demonstrates this.

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Even though the Lord preserves His own "yet the converted are not always so led and moved by God" that they cannot fall into serious and atrocious sins. We should not be shocked by the fact that people of the Lord can fall very deeply. Rather than holding it against a person for the rest of his/her life we are to follow the prescription of the apostle Paul who reminds us, "*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness*" (Galatians 6:1).

Every Christian is prone to fall into sin and therefore we should never think such things couldn't happen to us. No one is immune to temptations or the seduction of one's own sinful flesh.

If believers are not careful they can be enticed by the lusts of the flesh and be drawn away from the Lord. The lusts of the flesh can be of a sexual nature. Many people have struggled against sexual lust and impurity. Nevertheless, there are other actions which are just as much "lusts of the flesh" as sexual sins. They include loving money, craving for those things which can injure or hurt us, longing to be honoured and praised by people for all the good work we do. Galatians 5:19-21 list the works of the flesh as "*fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like.*"

When this article speaks about "atrocious" sins it means those which are clearly in conflict with the Lord's commandments, dishonouring His name, bringing shame upon oneself and causing grief to all those who love the Lord, and resulting in ridicule by unbelievers.<sup>11</sup> The Bible repeatedly warns us "*to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul*" (1 Peter 2:11).

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### *David and Peter*

By the righteous permission of the Lord saints do fall. Thereby God teaches us to realize how sinful we are and how grateful we must be for His grace in Christ.

The names of David and Peter are mentioned specifically because they are clear examples of how believers can fall into gross sins. David yielded to the sin of adultery. While Uriah is out on the battlefield he takes Bathsheba and has sexual relations with her. He tries to cover his sinful actions by suggesting to Uriah that he spend some time with his wife. When Uriah refuses to cooperate, David tells Joab to put him on the front lines and allows him to be a target for the enemy.

The apostle Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. But when he realizes that he could be in trouble for being a disciple of Jesus he denies having any association with Christ. The Lord Jesus knew beforehand that Peter would deny Him three times (Luke 22:31-34). Yet the grace of God is strong and will restore us even though at times we are overcome by the weakness of our flesh.

### *Watch and Pray*

The Lord cannot be blamed for our disobedience; nor should we point the finger at others who caused us to act the way we did. Falling into sin is our own fault and can be avoided by watchfulness and prayer. We must pray constantly and without ceasing that we are not led into temptation otherwise we leave ourselves wide open to be attacked by the enemies of God. "Watching" includes self-examination, learning to discern, and testing the spirits of the times. Rather than trying to explain away our sinfulness we are to deal with them concretely. At the beginning of each day we must pray "Lord, keep us from sin and temptation". Children in the covenant need to be taught from their youth to pray, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*" (Psalm 139:23,24).

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### ARTICLE 5: THE EFFECTS OF SUCH SERIOUS SINS

By such gross sins, however, they greatly offend God, incur the guilt of death, grieve the Holy Spirit, suspend the exercise of faith, severely wound their consciences, and sometimes for a while lose the sense of God's favour until they return to the right way through sincere repentance and God's fatherly face again shines upon them.

When we do not watch and pray several things happen. Article 5 lists some of the effects of such serious sins.

- ***Offend God***

First of all we offend God. Every time we sin against God's commandments we slight Him. Having committed sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah, David confessed in Psalm 51 "*Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight*" (Psalm 51:4). Sin creates a barrier between God and us. The Lord is terribly displeased by our sins. We may gloss over sins rather easily but our Father in heaven will never do that.

- ***Guilty conscience***

The second effect of such serious sins is that we incur the guilt of death and injure our consciences. Christ delivered us from the wrath of God and took away both the pollution and guilt of sin. Sin takes away the assurance that our guilt is covered in the sight of heaven. In Psalm 32 David portrays how he felt when he was not reconciled with the Lord. "*When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer*" (Psalm 32:3,4). Unconfessed sins can do much damage to a person's spiritual and physical well-being. Sin

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robs us of joy, happiness, and peace with the Lord, and can destroy our relationships.

- ***Grieving the Holy Spirit***

Thirdly, falling into gross sins grieves the Holy Spirit. The covenant people of the Old Testament experienced what happens when they turn away from the Lord. God had been their guide and Redeemer. Isaiah said, "*In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old*" (Isaiah 63:9). That's why it was such a serious matter when they rejected His love and rebelled against Him. Isaiah continues, "*But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; therefore He turned to be their enemy, and Himself fought against them*".

When God's love is spurned He will turn against His people in wrath and punish them. The same applies in the New Dispensation. Grieving the Spirit will be followed by the discipline, chastisement and punishment of the Lord. Therefore the apostle Paul exhorts the Ephesians to learn from the history of redemption "*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption*" (Ephesians 4:30).

We can also grieve the Holy Spirit by acting out of custom or superstition, by living in an unchristian manner or by failing to identify ourselves as a holy people.

- ***Suspending holy exercises***

Gross sins also suspend the exercise of godliness. The standards the Lord requires for training in righteousness are lowered. We cannot be bothered to read Scripture, prayer is neglected and attending church is an aggravation and nuisance.<sup>12</sup>



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- *Losing a sense of God's favour*

By allowing sin to dominate, a believer can sometimes lose the sense of God's favour. The grace of the Lord remains but the bond of faith is broken. The assurance and certainty of receiving grace is taken away.

### *The results of sincere repentance*

True and sincere repentance puts us back on the right path and in the right relationship with the Lord. As was spelled out in chapter III/IV repentance is to grieve that we have offended God by our sin, to hate sin and flee from it. At the same time it is a love and delight to live according to the will of God. Forgiveness opens the door of God's blessing so that what was said by the Old Testament priests after the offerings for sin were made, also applies to us, "*The Lord bless you and keep you: The Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace*" (Numbers 6:24-26). The way of life is the way of repentance. Pleading on the mercy of the Lord we can be sure that His face will shine on us in love.

### *Conclusion*

From the Articles 3-5 we are made deeply aware of the faithfulness of God who keeps us in the obedience of faith. Those who stand in faith are warned against pride. He who does not humble himself before God will be cut off from the people of the Lord. "*Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall*" (1 Corinthians 10:12). Both the promises and the warnings of the covenant are of equal significance.

The Arminians claimed that "by its very nature the doctrine of the certainty of perseverance and salvation causes false security and is harmful to godliness, good morals, prayers, and other holy exercises" (see Rejection of Errors Article 6). But from these articles we learn how such accusations are unfounded. All believers are commanded to live according to their calling in holiness and obedience.

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### ARTICLE 6: GOD WILL NOT PERMIT HIS ELECT TO BE LOST

For God, who is rich in mercy, according to the unchangeable purpose of His election, does not completely withdraw His Holy Spirit from His own even in their deplorable fall. Neither does He permit them to sink so deep that they fall away from the grace of adoption and the state of justification, or commit the sin unto death or the sin against the Holy Spirit and, totally deserted by Him, plunge themselves into eternal ruin.

By the introductory word of this article our confession lays the foundation for the doctrine of perseverance. Why does the Lord remain with His people in spite of their sins? The answer lies in God's unchangeable purpose of election.

#### *The mercy of God*

Saints do fall into serious sins. The effects are devastating but, thanks to the mercy of God, the elect will not totally fall away. "For God, who is rich in mercy ...does not completely withdraw His Holy Spirit from His own even in their deplorable fall". To the comfort of believers the Lord makes a fresh start with us every day. His mercies are new every morning. When the skies of our life are cloudy and the struggle against sin relentless, our hope and consolation can be found with the Lord. "*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness*" (Lamentations 3:22,23).

#### *The Spirit of God not taken away*

God who is rich in mercy does not withdraw His Spirit from us. Just as Christ humbled Himself and took on our flesh and blood, so the Holy Spirit humbles Himself and remains in our sinful hearts.<sup>13</sup> He sees to it that we do not fall away completely but that the war against sin continues. The faithfulness of the Spirit causes the Word of God

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to work in our hearts so that we are brought to repentance when we stray.

As Christians we have been anointed by the Spirit to fulfil the task given to us. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Every time we sin we defile the temple. Nevertheless, because God promises never to leave or forsake us we can pray with David, "*Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me*" (Psalm 51:11).

### *The sin against the Holy Spirit*

The Lord will not permit His own to sink so deeply that they commit the sin unto death, that is, the sin against the Holy Spirit. Why not? The sin against the Holy Spirit is unpardonable. Jesus Christ spoke about this sin in Matthew 12:30-32, "*He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come*". Why does our Lord Jesus single out "speaking against the Holy Spirit"? Is it a less serious offence to blaspheme the name of the other persons of the Triune God?

When Christ says the sin against the Holy Spirit is unpardonable He is not referring to the Spirit's person as such but to the era in which His work is predominant. The Pharisees spoke strong words against Christ and claimed that His work was done by the power of Beelzebub. Israel's religious leaders make a very serious charge against Him. But it is a charge against the Son of man in His humiliation. In other words, in their zeal for the work of the Lord they do not fully realize how they are opposing the work of God. But Christ warns that in the age of the Spirit there will be no excuse for church members who reject the work of the Spirit and curse the name of the Lord. Those who commit the unpardonable sin are members

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of the church who have tasted the goodness of the Word of God but reject it (Hebrews 6:4-6). They may have preached the Word or served as an elder or deacon but they spurn what the Lord promises His people. They harden themselves in sin and will not repent. And where there is no repentance there is no forgiveness.<sup>14</sup> Sinning against the Holy Spirit is not daily sins or weaknesses but it is living and hardening oneself in sin without any remorse.

Arminians believe that "true regenerate believers can commit the sin that leads to death or the sin against the Holy Spirit" (Chapter V, Rejection of Errors, Article 4). But the churches of the Reformation maintain God's sovereign grace is the only ground of salvation. The Lord will not permit His children to commit the sin unto death because He works repentance in their hearts.

Those whom God has chosen will not fall out of the state of justification. Will He who justified us while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8) take away from us what He gave us as a gift of His undeserved grace? God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us (Romans 5:5). Justification is an act of God whereby He, in Christ, declares us innocent, sets us free from guilt and punishment and grants us eternal life. Such justification is irrevocable and unalterable as a verdict of the Most High God.<sup>15</sup> Our conscience accuses us that we grievously sin against all God's commandments and are still inclined to evil. Yet we will not fall away from the grace of being God's adopted children.

### **ARTICLE 7: GOD WILL AGAIN RENEW HIS ELECT TO REPENTANCE**

For in the first place, in their fall, He preserves in them His imperishable seed of regeneration, so that it does not perish and is not cast out. Further, through His Word and Spirit He certainly and effectually renews them to repentance. As a result they grieve from the heart with a godly sorrow for the sins they have committed; they seek

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and obtain through faith with a contrite heart forgiveness in the blood of the Mediator; they again experience the favour of a reconciled God and adore His mercies and faithfulness. And from now on they more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.

Children of God who fall into sin do not lose the grace of adoption or their eternal inheritance (Article 6) because God preserves in them His imperishable seed of regeneration and He renews them to repentance.

### *Imperishable seed preserved*

What exactly is the seed of regeneration preserved in the believer? The apostle Peter gives us the answer, "*You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God*" (1 Peter 1:23). A similar statement is made in James 1:21, "*Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls*". The preached Word is the imperishable seed of regeneration (see further Chapter III/IV article 17).

The Word of God convicted David of his sins. The Lord sent Nathan, the prophet, to confront him with his sins. It is an act of the Lord's mercy and goodness when He sends us people who tell us the truth, even when it hurts. When through weakness we fall into sin we must not despair of God's mercy but plead on His promise. For "*if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9)

### *Renewal to repentance*

Objects which have become old, run-down and dilapidated need to be fixed up and refurbished. Renovations to a house can make it look fresh and new. Likewise the Lord changes our life so that what was broken by sin is renewed and restored. This renewal is brought about by His Word and Spirit. These are the instruments the Lord uses to place us on the right path and to get us back on track.

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Notice how Word and Spirit are mentioned in the same breath. The source and the means by which the source does His work are kept together.<sup>16</sup>

### *The results of such renewal*

Through the Word, the Holy Spirit produces godly grief and "*a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret*" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Godly sorrow for sin is more than feeling sorry. Esau sought the birthright with tears. Simon the magician was scared of what would happen. But tears will not substitute the need for repentance from a contrite heart. A person who has godly sorrow for sin grieves not only because of the consequences of sin but more because he understands the nature of God's holiness. He realizes that he has offended and wronged God.

Those who are renewed to repentance also seek forgiveness of sins in the blood of the Mediator. They want to have a good relationship with the Lord and they praise God for His mercy and faithfulness. He who seeks forgiveness in Christ will experience how good and gracious God is.

When the Holy Spirit works in our hearts we are equipped for work in the office of all believers. He changes us so that we are now in the Lord's service at home, at school, at work, and in the activities of the church. As we grow and mature in the knowledge of Christ we are the more careful and diligent to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). Every day anew the Holy Spirit must bring us to Him who *sought* us in His love and *bought* us with His blood.

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### ARTICLE 8: THE GRACE OF THE TRIUNE GOD PRESERVES

So it is not through their own merits or strength but through the undeserved mercy of God that they neither totally fall away from faith and grace nor remain in their downfall and are finally lost. With respect to themselves this could not only easily happen but would undoubtedly happen. But with respect to God this cannot possibly happen, since His counsel cannot be changed, His promise cannot fail, the calling according to His purpose cannot be revoked, the merit, intercession, and preservation of Christ cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be frustrated nor destroyed.

This article summarizes what has been said to this point about the doctrine of perseverance of the saints and turns us back to the source of our endurance.

The Arminians claimed the perseverance of true believers is not a fruit of election but a condition of the covenant which man must fulfil before he can be elected (Chapter V, Rejection of Errors, Article 1). In answer to this the fathers of Dort settle the matter by contrasting man's weakness and incapability with the ability of the Triune God.

Perseverance of the saints is not in our own hands. We are kept by God who engraves us on the palms of His hands (Isaiah 49:16). All praise must go to God and not to man. "*Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to thy name give glory, for the sake of thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness!*" (Psalm 115:1). All three persons of the triune God are involved in the perseverance of the saints.

#### *Perseverance and the plan of the Father*

The saints will persevere because the plan of God the Father will not be broken. "*The counsel of the Lord stands forever*" (Psalm 33:11).

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The work of people can fall to ruin and the plans of man are easily broken. But this will not happen to the activity of God the Father. His counsel cannot be changed and His promise cannot fail. The Lord Himself speaks of this beautifully through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, *"For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you"* (Isaiah 54:10; see also Isaiah 46:10 and Hebrews 6:17). Moreover, God's calling cannot be revoked. The perseverance of the saints is an important link in the golden chain of salvation (Romans 8:28-30).

### *Perseverance and the salvation of God the Son*

The elect endure to the end because the merit, intercession and preservation of Christ cannot be nullified. Christ has obtained for us righteousness and life. No one can undo what He has accomplished. *"He entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption"* (Hebrews 9:12). Based on what He accomplished through His death on the cross Christ continually makes intercession for us (John 17:9,24; Romans 8:34, Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1) and keeps us as members of His flock (John 10:28,29; 17:11-12).

### *Perseverance and the faithfulness of God the Spirit*

Scripture also speaks of the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit. He seals us for the day of redemption. In the Ancient Near East, a master put a seal on his slave to indicate ownership. Seals were used to protect important and valuable documents. The Holy Spirit puts a seal on us, showing we belong to Jesus Christ. Through Christ, God chooses us to eternal life and *"in Him (you) also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory"* (Ephesians 1:13,14). The Holy Spirit "is given to me, to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits, to comfort me,



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and to remain with me forever" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 20).

### ARTICLE 9: THE ASSURANCE OF THIS PRESERVATION

Believers themselves can be certain of this preservation of the elect to salvation and the perseverance of true believers in the faith. And they are indeed certain according to the measure of their faith, by which they firmly believe that they are and always shall remain true and living members of the church, and that they have forgiveness of sins and life eternal.

The message of Scripture is clear: God preserves His saints. But how can you know that the general promise of perseverance is specifically for you? Not every person who hears the good news of salvation receives it with joy. The Word of God is sown in different kinds of soil (Luke 8:4-15). Moreover, Christ said to His disciples "*By your endurance you will gain your lives*" (Luke 21:19). Can you be sure God will preserve you personally?

The Arminians claimed that "without a special revelation we can have no certainty of future perseverance in this life". Again the Reformed churches had to refute this doctrine because it takes away the sure comfort of believers and introduces "the doubting of the followers of the pope" (Chapter V, Rejection of Errors, Article 5). What was gained with the Reformation is lost if Arminian thinking is accepted.

Why do some lack assurance? This can be caused by a wrong or one-sided emphasis in preaching. Assurance may also be lacking because of a sin that hangs over our lives like a dark shadow. Unconfessed sins cause us to live with guilt.<sup>17</sup>

Something vital is missing in our lives if we are not able to talk about the assurance of perseverance. Faith without certainty is not true faith (Lord's Day 7). Assurance is not based on man's

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experiences or feelings but on the very constant promises of God (Romans 8:38,39; 1 John 3:24). The knowledge of these promises comes through hearing the Word of God.

### *Assurance according to the measure of faith*

The assurance of perseverance is not found in equal measure with all believers. The Bible speaks of the measure of faith as having "little" and "great" faith. This does not mean faith is measured in terms of quantity but in terms of strength.

Little faith is having a firm confidence and trust in God, but not at all times. You act according to the Word of God in one situation but in another you do not. Little faith is like a car that keeps stalling. The activity of faith is constantly interrupted. You acknowledge that God gives you everything you need to live and die happily but do not apply that consistently.

On the other hand, great faith is a determined conviction that what God says is true. Those of "great" faith persevere throughout all circumstances. Their faith is durable and does not stall. The Lord calls us to be people of great faith, firmly believing that we are and always shall remain true and living members of the church, and that we have forgiveness of sins and life eternal. Assurance is a fruit of faith. Where faith is lacking, you cannot expect to find assurance.

### *The promise of perseverance*

Perseverance of the saints is a promise the Lord grants to the church. By exercising our faith and living out of the promises of God we gain the assurance that what God grants to the church is also granted to me as a true and living member of Christ's congregation (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 7 & 21).

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### ARTICLE 10: THE SOURCE OF THIS ASSURANCE

This assurance is not produced by a certain private revelation besides or outside the Word, but by faith in the promises of God, which He has most abundantly revealed in His Word for our comfort; by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, witnessing with our spirit that we are children and heirs of God; and, finally, by the serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and of good works. And if the elect of God did not have in this world the solid comfort of obtaining the victory and this unfailing pledge of eternal glory, they would be of all men the most miserable.

The assurance of perseverance is not produced by a special revelation but has its origin in the Word of God. Many nowadays consider it to be a mark of a true Christian to receive some special indication from God that He is with them. People are hungry for stories which tell of such "experiences". Our confession directs us to the source of assurance. "To obtain assurance of faith and therefore assurance of perseverance, you are always driven back to the contents of the covenant promise which must be accepted in faith".<sup>18</sup>

As was already mentioned in the previous article, the assurance of perseverance is not obtained through a special revelation or through personal and pious experiences. Assurance built on experiences will ultimately lead to confusion and doubt. Of course we do not throw away "experience" as if it has no value. Yet it is not the basis for assurance but an outgrowth and product of assurance.<sup>19</sup> To seek assurance outside the Word of God is an act of haughtiness. We act like we are wiser than the Lord who directs us to the Bible.<sup>20</sup> Only the Word of God gives certainty and comfort for it reveals that "*He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 1:6).

The assurance of endurance and of remaining a living member of the church comes through three means: faith in the promises of God, the

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testimony of the Holy Spirit and the serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and of good works. Let us look at each of these individually.

### *Assurance by faith in the promises*

The Bible is the book of God's promises. His commitment to us permeates almost every page. The first instance is given in Genesis 3:15 where God promises to send the Messiah and Mediator of the covenant. The last book of the Bible finishes with the promise of Christ's return. Through Jesus Christ we respond to all God's promises in faith. 2 Corinthians 1:19,20 says, "*For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No; but in Him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why we utter the Amen through Him, to the glory of God*". He who believes and builds his faith on the promises of the Lord will not be put to shame (Isaiah 28:16; 1 Peter 2:6). Scripture gives us countless promises to comfort us abundantly. Take for example the book of Psalms where God promises to be a refuge and shield for His people. He promises His nearness, protection, blessing, salvation, vindication, steadfast love, mercy, etc.

### *Testimony of the Holy Spirit*

The certainty of assurance is also granted through the witness of the Holy Spirit. Scripture testifies to this in Romans 8:14,15b,16 "*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. When we cry, 'Abba!, Father!'*" it is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God". The Holy Spirit applies to us the promises of the forgiveness of sins and life eternal. He works the certainty and confidence of faith in us by teaching us to address God as our Father and thus to know ourselves as God's children.

### *Assurance by a clear conscience and good works*

We cannot expect to gain comfort from the promises of God if we do not work with them. The Canons of Dort echoes here what is

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confessed in Lord's Day 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism. We must do good works so that we ourselves may be assured of our faith. The apostle Paul took "*...pains to have a clear conscience toward God and toward men*". (Acts 24:16). The more we strive to live a life pleasing to the Lord the more we will be assured that God will keep us to the end. Faith, as an obedient answer to God's revelation is "*...the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*" (Hebrews 11:1). A clear conscience and good works are fruits of God's work in us (John 15:1-10). Therefore "*let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*" Hebrews 10:22).

The three means spelled out in this article keep us on track with our eyes fixed on the final victory. Our triumph is guaranteed. With God at our side as our shield and protection we are more than conquerors. Therefore we do not have to become discouraged by what we see happening around us.

### ARTICLE 11: THIS ASSURANCE NOT ALWAYS FELT

Scripture meanwhile testifies that believers in this life have to struggle with various doubts of the flesh and, placed under severe temptation, do not always feel this full assurance of faith and certainty of perseverance. But God, the Father of all comfort, will not let them be tempted beyond their strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, and by the Holy Spirit will again revive in them the certainty of perseverance.

#### *Doubts and temptations*

That very same Word of God which is the source of assurance does not hide from us the struggle believers may have with their faith. "We do not have perfect faith and we do not serve God with such zeal as He requires. Daily we have to contend with the weakness of our faith and with the evil desires of our flesh".<sup>21</sup> Satan tries to lure

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us away by making us doubt. Just as a fisherman throws out his bait and makes it look attractive by using a colourful lure, so the devil tries to attract us to follow the ways of the world and to distract us from our Christian calling. Doubting pushes us back and forth so that we don't stand firm in our convictions. Even the most holy men struggled when confronted by trials and temptations (Job 19:7; Psalm 73:2; 77:8). The Bible does not know of any "heroes" of faith. Even Hebrews 11 does not give us a list of heroes but illustrates the power of faith itself.<sup>22</sup>

### *The example of Job*

The book of Job is a wonderful example of how assurance is not always felt and how the Father of all comfort will not let us be tempted beyond what we can handle. Job is not merely a story about the riddle and mystery of human suffering or about the struggles and experiences of a man who had everything and lost everything. The Holy Spirit directs us to the majesty, strength, solidity and steadfastness of our God. The LORD our God does not leave us to fend for ourselves, to fight our own battles against the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. Job persevered even though he was tested severely because God kept him in the salvation obtained for him. His three friends believed everyone is in control of their own destiny and salvation. As an early form of Arminianism they viewed God as the One who punishes and rewards according to man's works.

Through what transpires in the life of Job all believers are taught how to view what takes place in their own lives. The Lord will vindicate His people and He will show to all the world that the cause of His children is just and right. Satan cannot conquer the grace of God. The Lord will see to it that we make it across the finish line no matter how much dirt Satan throws out at us in an attempt to make us fall and stumble.<sup>23</sup>

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### *Christ our only hope*

This promise of the Lord is constant because of what Christ has accomplished for us by His death on the cross. He experienced hell and was forsaken by the Lord for our sake. The Heidelberg Catechism states it beautifully, "In my greatest sorrows and temptations I may be assured and comforted that my Lord Jesus Christ, by His unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony, which He endured throughout all His sufferings but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell" (Lord's Day 16).

### ARTICLE 12: THIS ASSURANCE IS AN INCENTIVE TO GODLINESS

This certainty of perseverance, however, so far from making true believers proud and complacent, is rather the true root of humility, childlike reverence, genuine godliness, endurance in every struggle, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in the confession of the truth, and lasting joy in God. Further, the consideration of this benefit is for them an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works, as is evident from the testimonies of Scripture and the examples of the saints.

### *Believers are not perfect*

Word and deed, doctrine and conduct have to be one. Yet that isn't always the way it is. Ministers do not always practice what they preach. Members of the congregation are not as zealous as they ought to be. Outsiders are sometimes very critical of the behaviour of Christians. We may not excuse the bad behaviour of fellow believers, yet we must remember that the people of God are not perfect. James says "*We all make many mistakes*" and Paul says to the Philippians, "*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own*" (3:12).

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### *No reason for pride or complacency*

According to the Arminians the Reformed doctrine of perseverance leads to false security. It causes people to think they have arrived. "By its very nature the doctrine of the certainty of perseverance and salvation causes false security and is harmful to godliness, good morals, prayers, and other holy exercises" (Chapter V, Rejection of Errors, Article 6). This accusation was answered a century earlier by the writers of the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 24. "It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness".

Amos warns those who are at ease and think that being a member of the covenant will save them, "*Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria*" (Amos 6:1). Christians must count the cost of being disciples of Christ. They realize following Him does not make life easy for them. They know the word of Scripture, "*The highway of the upright turns aside from evil; he who guards his way preserves his life. Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall*" (Proverbs 16:17,18).

The certainty of perseverance is the true root of:

- *humility*  
True believers bend their knees in submission to the Lord, confessing their sins daily. They acknowledge they are dependent on His help and realize that everything is given to them through grace alone. Thus Peter encourages his readers, "*Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble*" (1 Peter 5:5).
- *childlike reverence*  
As God's adopted children we respect and honour the Lord. We don't serve the Lord because we want to get to heaven or to escape wrath and condemnation, but to praise and glorify His great and holy name. Every day we live out of God's



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gracious hand and believe He will provide us with all that we need to persevere in faith.

- *genuine godliness*  
Godliness is directing ourselves toward God. It is good worship, correct service and loyalty. Godliness transforms our attitude, our outlook and our involvement. Having the certainty of perseverance does not lead to godlessness but a pursuit of holiness.
- *endurance in every struggle*  
Until our last sinful breath life will be a struggle. But the Lord, who is faithful, will keep us. God's preservation of the saints is the incentive for endurance. Knowing that the eternal inheritance is kept in store for us in heaven we are able to confess, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).
- *fervent prayers*  
Those who have the certainty of perseverance do not rest on their laurels but pray fervently for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To pray fervently means praying in earnest with your whole being, having an intense and passionate desire to see the Lord's plan fulfilled. We pray for the continuation of the Lord's work and for the final victory of all God's children.
- *constancy in suffering and in confession of the truth*  
The Lord is faithful to His Word and therefore we too must be true to what we say and confess; even if it means suffering. If we live close to the Word of the Lord and to His promises then we will not be tossed back and forth by every wind of doctrine or by the trends of the day.
- *lasting joy in God*  
Having everything in the Triune God we have joy which knows no boundaries. The joy of the Lord is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10). The essence of the joy we have in the Lord is also captured by Psalm 16:11, "Thou dost show me the

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*path of life; in thy presence there is fulness of joy, in Thy right hand are pleasures for evermore."*

The certainty of perseverance is "an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works". Contrary to the opinion of the Arminians the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is not harmful but it is a stimulus to a life of good works.

### *The witness of Scripture*

The saints of the Old and New Testament testify that the doctrine of perseverance is an incentive to good works. Thus David says in Psalm 32:8,9, "*I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not keep with you*", and the apostle John writes in his first letter, "*Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And every one who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure*" (1 John 3:2,3).

## ARTICLE 13: THIS ASSURANCE DOES NOT LEAD TO CARELESSNESS

Neither does this renewed confidence produce carelessness or neglect of godliness in those who have been restored after their fall; rather, it produces in them a much greater concern to observe carefully the ways of the Lord, which He prepared beforehand. They observe these ways in order that by walking in them they may retain the certainty of their perseverance. Then shall the face of their gracious God not turn away from them again because of their abuse of His fatherly goodness, with the result that they would fall into still greater anguish of spirit. Indeed, to those who fear God the contemplation of His face is sweeter than life, but its withdrawal is more bitter than death.

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### *No carelessness*

Confidence in the Lord does not make true believers proud or complacent. It does not make them careless or wicked either. Believers do not sin on purpose because they know the Lord will preserve the elect. They are ashamed of their sins, hate them and flee from them. Having felt the pain of sin and the wounds it leaves they pray all the more earnestly, "*Lead us not into temptation*".

Those who have been restored into grace after they have fallen pray with the psalmist, "*Let me live, that I may praise thee, and let thy ordinances help me. I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek thy servant, for I do not forget thy commandments*" (Psalm 119:175,176). Being careful to walk in the ways of the Lord they retain the certainty of perseverance. Good works are to believers like a park with beautiful trees, birds and flowers. They love to walk in them to enjoy God.<sup>24</sup>

### *Living before God's face*

Two times this article mentions the face of God (compare Article 5). God's face shines upon His people when there is atonement, peace and a right relationship between them. His face is hid from them when there is sin, unholiness and disobedience. Thus children of the Lord prayed, "*Lift up the light of thy countenance upon us, O LORD!*" (Psalm 4:6); "*May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face to shine upon us...*" (Psalm 67:1); "*Hide not thy face from thy servant; for I am in distress, make haste to answer me*" (Psalm 69:17).

The Lord also promises to graciously "show" His face to His people. "*In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your Redeemer*" (Isaiah 54:8). When the Lord shows His face in love it is sweeter than life but when He hides it in indignation it is more bitter than death.<sup>25</sup>

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### ARTICLE 14: THE USE OF MEANS IN THIS PERSEVERANCE

Just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments.

#### *God begins His work through the preaching of His Word*

God begins His work of grace in us through the preaching of the gospel. But He does not leave the rest up to us. He continues, maintains and perfects that work through public, group, and family worship.

All worship is to be governed by the living Word of the Lord. We would not know God if we did not have His holy and infallible Word. Our worship of the Lord is a service of the Word. The Lord spells this out very clearly in Deuteronomy: Chapter 4:2, "*You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you*"; Chapter 8:3, "*And He humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything (every word, NKJV) that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.* The nearness of God's Word is the guarantee of Israel's continued existence as covenant people of the Lord. Chapter 30:11-14, "*For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the Word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it*".

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### *The importance of Scripture reading*

What the Lord begins is continued, maintained and perfected through the reading of Scripture. For *"all scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work"* (2 Timothy 3:16). Concerning the importance of reading the Bible, Revelation 1:3 says, *"Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near"*.

In Reformed circles the Bible is usually read at breakfast, lunch and supper. Such a practice is in line with what this article states, "Just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so He maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of His Word, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises..." By word of mouth and by example we must teach our children to read and study the Bible so that they comprehend its message. However, the practice should not deteriorate into a custom, superstition or mechanical exercise.

### *Meditating*

The Lord also continues and maintains what He began in us through the use of meditation. The Lord, His law, testimonies, statutes, precepts, the splendor of His majesty and His mighty deeds are the subject of our meditation. Several Psalms bring that to light.

- Psalm 1:1,2 *"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on His law he meditates day and night."*
- Psalm 19:14, *"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer."*

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- Psalm 63:5,6 "*...my mouth praises thee with joyful lips, when I think of thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the watches of the night.*"
- Psalm 119:48,97,99, "*I revere thy commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on thy statutes... Oh, how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day... I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation.*"

Taking the time to meditate on the Lord's mighty deeds will bring us closer to the Lord in our personal life and in our understanding of His ways with His people. The Lord keeps us in His grace through words of comfort and exhortation. He admonishes us in love to guide and keep us on the road of salvation.

### *The use of the sacraments*

God also uses the sacraments as a means of completing what He has started in us. Through the sacraments we are strengthened in our faith. With every baptism and celebration of the Lord's Supper Christ shows to us in holy, visible, signs and seals that He shed His blood in the complete forgiveness of all our sins.

The use of the sacraments is not limited to the administration of these means of grace. We must use them throughout our life, reminding ourselves of the sign and seal we bear on our foreheads and of the communion we have with Christ and our brothers and sisters in the Lord. For example, when you struggle with doubt or with little self-confidence you can turn to the moment of your baptism where the Lord put the sign and seal of His grace on you. At that moment the promise of His presence was confirmed. God gave you every indication that you are special. When you sin and wrong the Lord, recall the words that were spoken at the celebration of the Lord's Supper: Remember and believe that the body (precious blood) of our Lord was broken (was poured out) in the complete forgiveness of all our sins.

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### ARTICLE 15: THIS DOCTRINE IS HATED BY SATAN BUT LOVED BY THE CHURCH

This doctrine of the perseverance of true believers and saints, and of their assurance of it, God has most abundantly revealed in His Word for the glory of His Name and for the consolation of the godly, and He impresses it on the hearts of believers. It is something which the flesh does not understand, Satan hates, the world ridicules, the ignorant and the hypocrites abuse, and the heretics attack. The Bride of Christ, on the other hand, has always loved this doctrine most tenderly and defended it steadfastly as a treasure of inestimable value; and God, against whom no counsel can avail and no strength can prevail, shall see to it that she will continue to do so. To this God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honour and glory forever. Amen.

#### *Final praise*

We have come to the concluding article of the Canons. Here the church sings a song of praise to the everlasting, living God. Salvation is granted to the believer by God's sovereign grace and mercy and therefore He must receive all the praise and glory.

The doctrines defended at Dort are the central teachings of Scripture. Article 15 gives two reasons why God has most abundantly revealed to us His ways of redemption, deliverance and perseverance:

- for the glory of His own name
- for the comfort of His people

#### *Resistance*

These doctrines of the church have and will continue to be met with opposition. Five forms of resistance are mentioned:

1. *our sinful flesh*

By nature we try to draw attention to ourselves and think we can help ourselves. Our flesh is not receptive to the idea that the Lord alone delivers and preserves His people. The

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wisdom and power of God is offensive to the sinful mind of man.

2. *Satan*

The devil hates the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints because he cannot keep people in the grip of his lies and deceit. Satan goes around like a roaring lion seeking whom he might devour (1 Peter 5:8). He knows his time is short (Revelation 12:12). Since God preserves His saints the devil cannot win.

3. *the world*

The certainty and hope of believers is literally "out of this world". It is ridiculed by the children of the devil as absurd. Don't all the people of the world suffer a common lot? The end of every human being is the grave! The godless are not impressed with the Christian faith and consequently make life difficult for the people of God. Many of the psalms are pleas for deliverance from the mockery, scorn and ridicule of the wicked.

4. *the ignorant and hypocrites*

What God promises to His church is misused and abused by those who make no effort to learn the truths of God's Word and by those who outwardly belong to the people of the Lord but still go their own way.

Hypocrites are actors. They confess with their lips that salvation is from God but they do not give their heart to the Lord or submit themselves to His will.

5. *heretics*

Throughout history the doctrine of God's sovereign free grace has been attacked by people within the church. Our Lord Jesus Christ spoke out against the Pharisees, the apostle Paul against the Judaizers, Augustine against the Pelagians, John Calvin against the Roman Catholics, and the Reformed churches against the Arminians.



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### *The Bride's Treasure*

What the world may mock and attack is taken by the church as a treasure of great value. God's work of election, salvation, preservation is a treasure which the church admires and defends as a most precious jewel. To know that God will keep His people to the end is the heartbeat of the church.<sup>26</sup>

The Holy Spirit has given this treasure to the church for her comfort. It is extremely valuable; no one can put a price tag on it. Words cannot adequately describe the wonder of God's grace and mercy.

The church would not be the bride of Christ if the Father had not demonstrated His love to us. The Lord will finish perfectly what He has started. Therefore the bride looks forward to the completion of God's work of salvation and calls out to the bridegroom "Come".

Since the Lord preserves His saints the day is coming when it will be said, "*Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure'-- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints*" (Revelation 19:6b-8).

Heaven and earth will pass away but the Word of God remains forever (Matthew 24:35; 1 Peter 1:25). Therefore believers in the Lord do not have to worry that this confession will become outdated. It is a faithful summary of what the Bible teaches.

***Now to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit let eternal praise be given for providing us with such unspeakable comfort!***

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### *Questions*

1. Elaborate on the statement "Perseverance of the saints is a fruit of election". (Article 1)
2. What is meant by the term "saints"? (Article 1)
3. Discuss what it means to be set free from the dominion and slavery of sin. Can you give concrete examples of sins that can enslave? (Article 1)
4. Is there a danger in saying we are not entirely freed from the slavery of sin? (Article 1)
5. Explain the meaning of the phrase "sins of weakness". (Article 2)
6. How do you put to death the sins of the flesh by exercising godliness? (Article 2)
7. What are some of the temptations of the world that the church must struggle against today? (Article 3)
8. Do you think it is more difficult to remain in the ways of the Lord now than it was in the past? (Article 3).
9. What does it mean to be seduced by and to yield to the lust of the flesh? (Article 4)
10. Are there ways in which we can help each other watch so that we do not fall into sin? (Article 4)
11. What does it mean to grieve the Holy Spirit? In your answer look at the context of Ephesians 4:30 (Article 5)

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12. Can physical or mental problems be the result of living in sin? (Article 5)
13. If the Lord will not withdraw His Spirit from us why did David pray in Psalm 51, "Do not take thy Spirit from me"? (Article 6)
14. What is the sin against the Holy Spirit? Can you know whether an individual has committed this sin? (Article 6)
15. What is meant by the term "the imperishable seed of regeneration"? (Article 7)
16. Explain the difference between a godly and selfish sorrow for sin. (Article 7)
17. When are we sealed with the Holy Spirit? (Article 8)
18. How are we to speak about the assurance of faith? What causes a lack of assurance in the life of the church? (Article 9)
19. What is meant by the expression "the measure of faith"? (Article 9)
20. Many people build the assurance of faith and perseverance on their spiritual experiences. Why is this so dangerous? (Article 10)
21. Can doubting be a matter of character? (Article 11)
22. The certainty of perseverance is the true root of humility, childlike reverence, genuine godliness etc. Discuss what this means. (Article 12)

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23. What does it mean that God's face shines upon us? (Article 13)
24. The Lord maintains, continues and perfects what He began in the preaching. Discuss the ways in which He does this and how that plays a role in your life. (Article 14)
25. The Canons of Dort conclude with a wonderful song of praise. How can we ensure that this praise is our song?

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### Notes

1. E.H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1972) p.68.
2. *Ibid.*, p.77.
3. H. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Reformed Free Publishing, 1980) pp. 633-64
4. J.H. Velema, *Het Geheim van de Volharding* (Kampen, Kok, 1989) p.14.
5. L. Doekes, "De Dordtse Leerregels" insert in *De Poortwake*, 1981.
6. "Form for the Baptism of Infants", *Book of Praise* (Winnipeg, Premier Printing, reprinted 1995) p. 585.
7. "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper", *Book of Praise*, p.596.
8. *Het Geheim van de Volharding*, p.20.
9. *The Voice of Our Fathers*, p.644.
10. *Het Geheim van de Volharding*, p. 30.
11. *Ibid.*, p.41.
12. *Ibid.*, p.49.
13. *Ibid.*, p.57.
14. B. Holwerda, *De Dingen Die Ons van God Geschonken Zijn*, Volume III (Goes, Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1955) pp. 155-166.

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15. J.G. Feenstra, *De Dordtse Leerregelen* (Kampen, Kok, 1950) p. 199.
16. *Het Geheim de Volharding*, p.67.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.
18. J. Faber, *The Bride's Treasure* (Launceston, Geneva Press, 1979) p.120.
19. *De Dordtse Leerregelen*, p. 216.
20. *Het geheim van de Volharding*, p. 93.
21. "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper", *Book of Praise*, p. 596.
22. E. Koop, *De Dordtse Leerregels Dicterbij Gebracht* (Kampen, Vandenberg, 1983) p. 172.
23. For an excellent commentary on the book Job see, C. Bijl, *As Rich as Job* (Kampen, Vandenberg, 1989).
24. *De Dordtse Leerregelen*, p. 228.
25. *De Dordtse Leerregels Dicterbij Gebracht*, p.179.
26. *De Dordtse Leerregelen*, p.237.