

Lesson 20 **THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS****Canons of Dort: Fifth Head of Doctrine**

20.1 The Two-Fold Line Carried Through

In the final head of doctrine, the two-fold line unfurled in the previous sections of the Canons is now spread out to its maximum fullness. The lines are drawn to their Scriptural conclusions: perseverance in faith for the believers, and an ever greater hardening for those who persist in unbelief.

1. The Power of the New Life

The seed of regeneration is planted by the Holy Spirit, and once planted can never be uprooted, 1 Peter 1: 24, 25. This does not mean that the old nature is completely removed from the life of man. Rather, we must contend with our old nature to the end of our lives. No one in this life can be fully freed from the “flesh and body of sin”, see Galatians 5:16-26. This phrase indicates how deeply sin has permeated human life, and that it belongs to our very nature after the fall. As we progress, the power of the flesh only increasingly manifests itself as an evil power in us, Romans 7: 18f. Nonetheless the indwelling power of the new life takes ever greater hold in the human heart.

2. Continued Trials

The Canons distinguish between a fall from grace and a fall into sin. The elect can never fall from grace, but they can and often do fall into sin, indeed, even into grievous sins. The duty of believers is to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling for it is God

who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure,” Philippians 2:13 (NASB). So it is their calling “to be diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you,” by diligently applying themselves to the means God has given, 1 Peter 1:10.

3. Impossibility of Mortal Sin

Those chosen by God cannot fall from grace. Hence they cannot sin the sin against the Holy Spirit. The passages which deal with this sin make clear that the focus is on those who are unregenerate, or unbelievers. The Pharisees who blasphemed Christ are identified as those committing this sin. John speaks of the one who is not born of God, 1 John 4:10.

The Remonstrants maintained that regenerated people could also commit this sin. They did not distinguish between faith and its fruits. If one did not show any fruits for a time, his faith could be entirely lost. For the Reformed, one’s faith can be weak and fragile, and thus temporarily showing little or no fruit; but once present, it cannot be lost. Believers must make every effort to practice and demonstrate a living faith through a godly walk.

4. The Marvel of God’s Work

Just as regeneration is a perfect work in God’s eyes, so the gift of faith is a perfect gift in man’s heart. This does not mean that the faith itself is perfect, or that the fruits are perfect. It only means that once He has begun this work, God never forsakes the works of His hand. He will perfectly bring to completion that which He has begun, Psalm 138:1, 8.

5. The Source of Assurance

The Canons state that the source for our assurance is not to be found in special internal revelations or miracles, as the Remonstrants intimated, but only in the Word of God, Psalm 119:105. God does not use special indicators, but general and common means in order to assure His saints of His work in their hearts. Meanwhile, every believer will experience and observe events in his life which only prove and confirm the truth of God's promises.

6. The Nature of Assurance

Since election is particular, ultimately each believer is made certain of his own salvation. No one believer can be absolutely convinced of the salvation of another, although in the family of the Church these certainties can be present as well. Primarily, assurance is directed to the individual believer in his place in the house and family of God.

Carnal or man-centred security is not to be confused with the assurance given by God. The difference between carnal security and the assurance of faith is seen in its source and the fruit. Carnal security is born in man's own heart, and places its confidence in one's own deeds. The assurance of faith rests in the power of the Word and places its confidence in the lasting and abiding truth of the promises of God.

Remarkably, every show of carnal security is normally accompanied by the expressions of insecurity on various sides. Ultimately no one can find security in himself or his deeds or in any other source outside of himself, except in God.

7. Necessity of Trials

Chastisement and trials all serve for the good of God's people. Through God's chastisement we become more conscious of our own sin and guilt. One conscious of his own guilt will consider how much his sin has grieved God's Spirit, Ephesians 4:13. If he experiences attack or persecution of one kind or another, he could bear it. But to be confronted with the disfavour of God due to one's own faults is more than he can bear. Turning to God in repentance, the saints are armed with a newer and deeper resolve to live in humility, piety and godly fear before His majesty.

8. Faith and Assurance

Just as faith is God's work, so perseverance is God's work, Philippians 1:6. God begins His work by the preaching of the gospel, and also allows His work to proceed through the preaching of the gospel and the use of the sacraments, as believers appropriate the good news in a true and living faith. While children are not yet able to fully appropriate the preaching of the gospel to themselves, they must live under the regular preaching of the Word, since it pleases God to awaken faith in their hearts through these means.

9. One Glorious Work

It is the same Spirit that works with the Word and through the Word that also kindles faith in the hearts of God's elect. There can be no polarity between the 'objective' side and the 'subjective' side of the Spirit's work. His works are never opposed to each other, and the one part of His work is as necessary as the other. While at times it may appear that there is division in God's work through the chastisement of the Father, the power of the Word and the indwelling

power of the Spirit prove that God is one and the same in all His works, and He is also glorified in the testing of His children, 1 Corinthians 10:13, Hebrews 13:5.

20.2 The Remonstrants Opposed

The Reformed were of the opinion that the view of the Remonstrants on perseverance and free will formed an attack on the whole gospel. Once one undercuts the Scriptural idea of perseverance, other doctrines soon begin to topple as well. In fact, one cannot but be left with an empty cross. For Paul in Romans 5 posits an indissoluble connection between Christ's substitutionary atonement on the cross and our salvation. He later outlines the "golden chain of salvation", Romans 8:28-30. Clearly if one link is removed, the entire chain is destroyed.

This was the standpoint taken by the Remonstrants. They denied the substitutionary value of Christ's death, and denied that the Holy Spirit was a person. In many ways they reflected the more humanistic teachings of the Socinians, who denied the Triune God.

The Remonstrants also depreciated the value of the preaching of the Word. Preaching was for them only imparting a human word. It was a matter of encouragement and reflection which one could freely receive or reject. They also insisted that the prayer of Jesus for His disciples indicated that people can fall from faith. If they were unable to fall, Jesus never would have prayed to the Father that He keep them in His grace, John 17:10. But the Reformed knew that the issue in the prayer concerns precisely the perseverance of the saints. Believers can fall into sin, and experience many difficult trials and

temptations. But the prayer of Jesus assures them that although they have fallen, they will never stumble so as to fall away completely.

The Remonstrants had many additional conditions for persevering in salvation, all of which were seen as within man's reach. One had to accept Christ, to hold on to Him, and to love Him in a life of good works. They also insisted that a special revelation was necessary for the knowledge of perseverance. This for them came through miracles, signs or other means. The Reformed kept faith and assurance together, and insisted that the only basis for the knowledge of faith and assurance lies in the Word of God.

Exercises Lesson 20

I. Reference Passages

Study and Review: Hebrews 6:1-6; 2 Peter 3:1-15
2 Thessalonians 3:3-5

II. Review Questions

1. What is the major division of the final head of doctrine? What are the minor divisions?
2. How do the Canons describe the present struggle of the believer against sin? If we are delivered from sin in Christ, why does the fight of sin continue in the believer's life?
3. Which Lord's Days of the Heidelberg Catechism also stress the constant struggle against sin that must be waged by all God's children?
4. What is it to grieve the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 4:30? Is it the same as the sin against the Holy Spirit?
5. What is always required in the life of a believer in order that he may persevere in faith?
6. Which psalm summarizes the contents of this last chapter of the Canons? Which other psalms stress the grace of perseverance?

III. Extra Questions

1. What is the relationship between faith and assurance? How are they connected in the letter to the Hebrews?
2. In what way does suffering in the flesh bring an end to sin, 1 Peter 4:1? Why is suffering beneficial for a believer?
3. The letter to the Hebrews speaks of the falling away of “those who have once been enlightened,” Hebrews 6:4. How do we match this expression with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints?
4. What thought does every chapter of the Canons of Dort start with? Contrast this with the way each chapter ends, and account for this structure.