

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XVII

(Readings: Rom.8:28-39; Matt.26:69-75)

How We Are Enabled To Endure

It's easy to misunderstand the title of this Chapter in the Westminster Confession of Faith. To many Christians reading, 'Of the Perseverance of the Saints,' serves to confirm what they need to do to make it through. And yet it couldn't be more different. In fact, this is really about God's perseverance - not ours!

This is something which became quite clear reading through the three Articles. It's already right there at the beginning of the first Article. "They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit..." For not only does it draw us in to all that the Lord has been doing so far, but it puts Him right in control. There's no doubt about that! Yet, there is so much doubt within Christian churches today. Not since just before the Reformation has there been so much insecurity amongst those calling themselves born-again. So what is happening today amongst Christians? Well, it's simply this: Coming to faith is a bit like the world's view of love - you can fall out of it just as quickly as you fall into it. And so an evangelistic crusade conducted through New Zealand recently can claim many thousands of conversions for Christ and yet very few of them end up in church. In fact, when this crusade is nothing more than so-called Christian Body Builders ripping telephone books in half, it's no wonder that many think themselves saved, especially the young. They want to do the same! But, of course, it's got nothing to do with being accepted in Christ, called, and sanctified. So they will not be kept in a state of grace and so be able to endure through to the end and so be forever saved, for they never came to properly hear the gospel and so respond in faith.

Once You Are Saved You Are Truly Saved

This is why the words of the first point to this Chapter is, ONCE YOU ARE SAVED YOU ARE TRULY SAVED. Because if God's Spirit brought home to them God's Word it's nothing they can ever fall out of! In the words of the apostle Paul to the Philippians, chapter 1 verse 6, "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

I'm reminded here of the story of the boy selling mince pies. You might have heard it, too. You see, congregation, in the major sporting stadiums you'll find people going up and down the stands, during the game, selling foodstuffs out of a special container strapped around their waist. Perhaps its ice creams or lollies, or it can be pies too.

One boy once was selling pies. And he kept calling out, "Hot-Mince Pies", "Hot-Mince Pies!" A person bought one of them. But he found it far from hot. It was cold! He said to that seller, "Boy, why did you call these pies hot?" "Oh," said the boy, "That's their brand name!"

You see, there are even plenty of people who are called Christians, but they're not really Christians. That's just the name they go by. Whatever heat they may have had for the Lord once, if there was ever any heat, has long gone. They're not truly saved.

We have to admit that what happens in church life seems to contradict this teaching. We can all remember people who became members of the church and who were so keen on the things of the faith. But later on they dropped right out of church and even became dead set against the faith. He or she looked like they fell from this grace Article 1 talks about.

This is where the apostle John helps us. In his first letter he tells us what really happens with these people. As he writes in the second chapter verse 19, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us."

It's these situations that prove it wasn't because they fell out of faith - they never had true faith! It was only what they appeared to have. Like the "hot mince pies" which weren't really hot.

True, you might stumble. It could even seem that you've nearly slipped away altogether. But if you are one of the Lord's He won't let you go. As John says later in his first letter, chapter 3 verse 9, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God."

God's Decree Means This Will Always Be

Congregation, ONCE YOU'RE SAVED YOU'RE TRULY SAVED. And it's all because, secondly, GOD'S DECREE MEANS THIS WILL ALWAYS BE.

You see, to be able to persevere in this state of grace to the end and so be eternally saved takes quite a power. Article 2 declares this quite explicitly. Because this doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is one of those areas Calvinists stand out from much of Christendom.

While the apostle Peter says in his first letter, chapter 1 verse 5, that through faith we are shielded by God's power until salvation, there are many churches throughout history who have taught and are teaching quite differently. It was against the Arminians in the early 17th century that this very point became one of the famous five points of Calvinism. And who could forget that flower - TULIP - where the letters in the name stand for points answering the specific beliefs that Arminianism proposed.

It was at that time, so soon after the Reformation had taken place, there were those who were preaching and teaching the same as Rome! The name 'Arminian' came about because it was a Jacob Arminius who was teaching this at the University of Leyden in the Netherlands.

This teaching is that it takes the power of man, as well as the power of God, to keep the saved from being lost. And that's right the way through. The coming to faith has to be your decision. And then keeping in the faith is up to you, too.

G. I. Williamson says that with this view God is like a petrol station. He has a great storehouse of power just waiting to be "tapped". But it's up to the sinner to drive in and pour it into his car.

They say that all this power is "powerless" until the sinner "makes his move."

Well, how appealing is that? You're in charge of even God's power.

Then they have to break the bad news to you. You see, you would have liked the idea that you could start the trip by your own free will and power. But now you're told you can also "run out of gas" and "fail to make your destination" by the same free will and power. The power of God that is powerless until the sinner makes his move at the beginning is just as powerless at any later time that the sinner may will it to be so.

Now you're definitely not so sure. Anything that depends on you in any way, shape or form, has got something definitely wrong with it! It cannot be trusted!

Look at what the Bible says, though! Article 2 brings out how it lies completely with Him. It says, "The perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election."

Note, it was God who has decided from time immemorial to do. And He didn't do that other by seeing beforehand if we would have the faith to respond to Him. He did that because it is all of Him - through and through!

And look then how He is in it! For all three persons of the Godhead are involved in this. There's the electing work of the Father, the saving work of the Son, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

This is what the Bible tells us. It's there in the Old Testament, in Jeremiah chapter 32 verse 40. The prophet speaking God's words says, "I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me."

And it's there in the New Testament Gospel of John. In chapter 10 verse 28 the apostle quotes Jesus saying, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."

Of course this doctrine will upset many people. But which would you really prefer? The God alone who saves which gives us a salvation that cannot fail - or the God who waits for us to save ourselves with a salvation which can fail.

Still, congregation, it cannot end here. For if we would then it could be said that we have a type of fatalism. Or 'hyper-calvinism' as some call it.

That means it doesn't matter what we do then. If we're saved we're saved. It's the Holy Spirit who perseveres. Is it?

For while we noted at the beginning that this is more about God's perseverance it is yet what He does through us. And while it's what the Holy Spirit is doing in us it isn't the Holy Spirit who perseveres. It's you doing that!

When We Sin It's Against What We Are Within

This is a mystery – this is one of those aspects in the Bible that we cannot fully explain. This is what the apostle Paul shows in Romans chapter 7. Because WHEN WE SIN IT'S AGAINST WHAT WE ARE WITHIN.

This is what the third Article is all about, for it is quite honest about what's against us, how it attacks us and what they bring us.

What's against us? Well, there's the temptations of Satan, this world, and our own selves. We aren't in glory now. The Church Triumphant hasn't arrived yet – Christ hasn't returned upon those clouds of glory - so we're in the Church Militant. We're part of the Church which is at battle.

And what a war it is! It's the dirtiest of all wars. There is no Geneva Convention here. It's whatever the enemy can do to bring us down. Because WHEN WE SIN IT'S AGAINST WHAT WE ARE WITHIN.

This means there is no "easy grace". You can't think you can just live any way you like and it will all turn out okay. For if you live a careless, lazy Christian life, not keeping to keeping the Lord's Day, not attending Bible Study, not having daily devotions, not praying with your family, you will backslide.

The more you do that, the worse it gets. And you know that's not right. Your own conscience then condemns you. There's no grace of perseverance if there's no duty of perseverance.

That's why you're here. You pay attention to God's Word. And so you persevere.

When Satan whispers, “If you sin you can repent,” you have to say, in Samuel Waldron’s words, “Yes, and you will, but to truly repent is to vomit up the sin. All the enjoyment of eating the dainty morsel of sin is more than made up for by the miserable nausea and vomiting. There will always be more misery than pleasure in sin for a true Christian.”

Just think about the effects of your sin. Your communion is blocked to the Lord. With David in Psalm 32 you feel God’s hand upon you - your strength is sapped as in the heat of summer. Have you felt that? Of course you have. All who are Christ’s have. It’s because at some point you were sinning. And until you came again to living out of God’s will in that area you kept feeling your lack. As Paul says in Romans 13 verse 3, “Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you.”

And then there is what your falling into sin does to others. How much haven’t we seen that with when office bearers in the church sinned?

While there’s the punishment they’ll have - both in the future and now - there’s also what they have done against those in their charge. The examples of Noah, Moses, David and Peter all stand out here.

We read about Peter in Matthew 26 where he denied the Lord three times. But there was also the time later in the early New Testament church when Paul had to rebuke him for leading the Lord’s congregation astray. In Galatians 2 verse 13 even Barnabas was deceived by him.

But it’s not only church leaders. Each one of us leads others astray in our sin - even without realising, because would you think not being in church would deter others? And yet it does! You deprive the Lord of the worship He is due. And you take away your participation in the fellowship with your fellow believers.

But there is forgiveness. And, as Psalm 130 verse 4 says, because of that forgiveness the LORD is feared. The fear that is not being afraid but is humbling yourself before all-holy One! The fear that does not take our salvation lightly. The fear that knows that while you are saved only narrowly you are saved nonetheless. And so with the great saints you do rise up and take up the battle again with Satan, this world, and your own flesh.

It’s this struggle which sorts out the men from the boys. It’s this fight which God uses to refine His people so that they can be used even more fruitfully for Him. Because then those around you can’t help but see it’s Him living in you!