

Thoughts about the Doctrine of Perseverance

It is quite obvious that in some instances the doctrine of perseverance is misunderstood. What people need to do is to thoroughly research the subject before jumping to conclusions. In some cases an inaccurate “straw man” is erected and then torn down. I would like to make some observations that I hope will be enlightening and helpful.

Historical Considerations

In light of some recent discussions one would think that the doctrine of perseverance is a new thing being advocated by some Primitive Baptists. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the term, “perseverance” was not invented by me nor by others of my brethren who advocate this doctrine. Historically the great majority of Primitive Baptist ministers have held to this doctrine. It is also true that many, many of the Articles of Faith of Old Line Primitive Baptist churches, and of Old Line Primitive Baptist associations have contained the very word, “perseverance” as well as what I believe and teach about this doctrine. It is very sad to me that many present day Primitive Baptists are either grossly ignorant of our history or care nothing for it.

We all know that the Bible is our only rule of faith and practice. No Articles of Faith or Confession of Faith can take the place of the Bible. However, everyone who claims to be a Christian claims to believe the Bible. The extremely Arminian denomination who refer to themselves as the “Church of Christ” have as a slogan, “No Creed but Christ; No Book but the Bible.” That sounds very pious, but when you really examine what they consistently teach you find that they have a very-well defined, Arminian creed, whether or not it is a formal one.

Because of this our forefathers thought it necessary to summarize what they believed the Bible to teach on certain subjects and to call those summaries Articles of Faith or Confessions. These summaries represented what our forefathers believed the Bible to teach. When Primitive Baptist preachers are ordained to the work of the gospel they are usually given a Certificate of Ordination that is signed by the members of the presbytery. Usually these certificates contain a brief summary of the doctrine the brother is expected to preach. This really amounts to an abbreviated confession of faith. Most of these certificates state that if the brother ceases to preach the enumerated truths his ordination is null and void.

Now, while we certainly and heartily believe that only the Bible is the inspired word of God, we also acknowledge that the Articles of Faith are very important. They represent what the Church of Jesus Christ believed before we came along. The brethren may not have been perfect, but they must have been essentially right if the church is indeed the “pillar and ground of the truth.” We should study these confessions very carefully. We should respect them and the faithful saints who drew them up. We make too much of the confessions if we put them on a par with the Scriptures. We make too little of the confessions if we remain ignorant of them and do not consider it worth our time to study them. We reveal a degree of arrogance if we can just lightly dismiss the truth taught in

those confessions, and affirm that our forefathers did not know what they were talking about.

Evidence From Primitive Baptist History

What I write now will not be exhaustive. It would be easy to produce hundreds of pages of evidence. However, if one will not be convinced by a few plain examples, he would not be convinced by a thousand pages. He would reveal a biased and closed mind.

The Fulton Confession: In November 1900 over fifty Primitive Baptist ministers gathered at Fulton, Kentucky to discuss some things pertaining to the welfare of Primitive Baptist churches. Some of the most respected ministers of the century were there. Men like J. B. Hardy, S. F. Cayce, J. H. Oliphant, Lee Hanks were household words among the Primitive Baptists of that time. Anyone who has even a smattering of knowledge of Primitive Baptist history will recognize these names. They wrote, “The London Confession of Faith was approved by a unanimous vote of the meeting. In view of the fact that this instrument was written more than 200 years ago and that our language naturally undergoes some change in so long a time, it was deemed prudent to add some explanations to those sections that seemed ambiguous. The whole confession, with the explanatory notes, was approved by a unanimous vote, and we now offer the whole in this form to our dear brethren everywhere...” There is no question that this represented the beliefs of the great majority of Primitive Baptists in 1900.

Chapter 17 of this confession is entitled *Of the Perseverance of the Saints*. The Fulton brethren so agreed with this article that they did not even include an explanatory footnote. I believe what these brethren endorsed. I stand where the great majority of Primitive Baptists stood in 1900. I have not tried to revise or modify what Primitive Baptists have included in their confessions and Articles of Faith. I did not coin the term “perseverance.” The great preachers of the past did.

Hassell’s History: The standard history for Primitive Baptists is the *History of the Church of God* by C. B. and Sylvester Hassell. While a person may disagree about some of the things in this book, it is impossible to deny that the Hassells were recognized as prominent Primitive Baptists who had the highest respect among Primitive Baptists all over the country. These men **knew** what Primitive Baptists believed before and during their time. There are no less than eighteen references to “final Perseverance of the saints” in their history. Here again, I did not coin this term, the forerunners of modern Primitive Baptists did. Following is a quote that the Hassells make in their book: “The patience and final perseverance of the saints, notwithstanding temporary distrust under Satan’s persecutions, which entailed loss of family, friends, possessions, and bodily health, are illustrated in Job’s history.” In *Hassell’s History* the authors list “Twelve Marks of the Apostolic Church.” In the doctrinal part of this list they write of “the total depravity of the human race in consequence of the fall of our first parents, the special eternal election of God’s people to everlasting life, the particular redemption purchased by the blood of Christ for all His people, the effectual calling and the final perseverance of the saints to glory.” Sylvester Hassell, speaking of the baptism of his father, wrote, “The great evangelical doctrine of the election, total depravity, particular redemption, effectual

calling, and final perseverance of the saints to glory, was at this early period immovably settled in his mind.” I feel honored to stand where these prominent and representative Primitive Baptist ministers stood on this subject.

J. H. Oliphant: Elder J. H. Oliphant, one of the most respected Primitive Baptist preachers of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries wrote a book in 1878. The title of the book? *Final Perseverance of the Saints*.

Church and Associational Records: Many, many Primitive Baptist church and associational Articles of Faith have the expression “Perseverance of the Saints” or “Final Perseverance of the Saints” in them. This expression did not bother the vast majority of our forefathers.

Misunderstanding

Many of those who oppose the doctrine of Final Perseverance do not understand what is being taught. They sometimes set up a “straw man” and proceed to tear it down. Some think we who hold to this doctrine are teaching some form of perfectionism. They believe that perseverance means that people will essentially live above sin. That is an error. At the bottom line **Preservation** is God’s infallible and eternal salvation. Every one of the elect will enjoy this complete salvation throughout their earthly lives after regeneration and will enjoy it for eternity. **Perseverance** is the **evidence** of this salvation. Just as in the natural realm, it is also true in the spiritual realm, it is absolutely impossible to be alive and not manifest it to some extent. Let us suppose that a dead man and a living man are lying next to each other. Let us further imagine that the living man is unconscious. Any close observer could readily detect a radical difference in the two. The living man will be breathing. He will have brain waves. He will manifest a degree of blood pressure. His breathing had **absolutely nothing** to do with his becoming alive. He also is not normally conscious of his breathing and of his heart beating. Those things are just an intrinsic part of being alive. That is the way it is in perseverance. For example, a born-again person will be a praying person. There will be times in his life when he will be spiritually cold and he may not be praying as he should. He may be spiritually very cold. However he will be groaning within his soul from time to time as the Holy Spirit works in him. This is what Paul was speaking about in Romans 8:26, “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.” **That is perseverance.**

Another thing a born-again person cannot do is to live in sin and be as happy in that condition as an unregenerate person could be. A good example is Lot. We know that Lot was a child of God. The Bible calls him “just Lot,” “that righteous man,” and “godly.” However, he was in a wicked place where he had no business being. Was he happy? The Bible says in 2 Peter 2:8 “(For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds;)...” **This is perseverance.** There were many people in Sodom who were not vexed. They were having the sinful time of their lives. But not Lot.

Faith

Another way of looking at this subject is considering the subject of faith. The child of God receives the gift of faith when he is born again. This is plain from 2 Peter 1: 1 and from Ephesians 2: 8. The Holy Spirit is the One who brings about the new birth and according to Galatians 5: 22 faith is a fruit of the Spirit. Will a child of God ever totally lose his faith? Of course not. That is impossible. Why? Because of what is written in Hebrews 12:2, “Looking unto Jesus the **author** and **finisher** of our faith...” Our Lord never begins something that He doesn't finish.

It is true that a child of God will have lapses of faith, but he will not totally lose it. Satan tried to destroy Peter's faith. The Lord Jesus said in Luke 22:31, 32, “And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.” Even though Peter had a grievous lack of faith and denied His Lord three times, his faith did not fail. Jesus had prayed for Him and the Father always hears the prayers of His Son. That same Son prays for every one of the elect! We read this glorious truth in Hebrews 7:25, “Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.” Thank God, it is impossible for a child of God to lose His faith. The manifestation of this faith is what **perseverance** is all about.

This manifestation is plainly shown in 1 John 5:4, “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.” This faith will sometimes be very weak in manifestation and sometimes it may seem to be almost nonexistent. However, it will never be extinguished.

There is a lot of practical value in this. Satan likes to harass the children of God and to give them doubts about their salvation. Sometimes we fall into grievous sin and our consciences are deeply wounded. We are miserable and wonder if we are really born again. Then we can take “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” and do battle against Satan. We can encourage ourselves with Scriptures like Philippians 1:6, “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ...”

David fell into terrible sin, but the Holy Spirit eventually brought him to sorrow for his sin and brought him to repentance. He was miserable while in an unrepentant state. He described his misery in graphic terms in Psalm 32:3, 4, “When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.” This **godly sorrow**, which led to his repentance, was a part of perseverance.

God chastises all His children. He wants us to be in some degree “partakers of his holiness.” (Heb. 12: 10). To some degree all His children are partakers of His holiness in a practical way. To deny this is to postulate that God is a failure.

Paul lived close to the Lord but he was never satisfied with his level of practical sanctification and service. He mourned about this. This is expressed in Romans 7:24, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” The very fact that Paul felt this way was part of his perseverance. An unregenerate person does not feel this way.

The Bottom Line

To repeat what has been said above: There is a radical and fundamental difference between one who is dead and one who is alive. The living person cannot avoid manifesting some signs of life. In the spiritual realm this is **perseverance**.

God bless each of you,
Brother Zack M. Guess
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