

MYTH 6

God Causes Perseverance in Good Works



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*For by grace you have been saved
through faith; and that not of yourselves,
it is the gift of God; not as a result
of works, so that no one may boast.
For we are His workmanship, created
in Christ Jesus for good works,
which God prepared beforehand
so that we would walk in them.*

Ephesians 2:8-10

*For we must all appear before the
judgment seat of Christ, so that each
one may be recompensed for his deeds
in the body, according to what he has
done, whether good or bad.*

2 Corinthians 5:10

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PERSEVERANCE IS A CHOICE

If you have ever gone to a circus or to a boardwalk at the beach, you have seen the mirrors that distort your appearance. As you approach one mirror, you appear fatter or thinner than you actually are. Another mirror makes you look taller or shorter. In each case the distortions misrepresent actual reality. Distortions also occur when Scripture is improperly interpreted. If so, what you hear and the books you read may misrepresent the actual intent or purpose of God found in the Scriptures.

Distortion or Not

Many theologians teach that the believer must persevere in good works until the end of life in order to guarantee eternal life. The Roman Church's position states it this way: "While we cannot have absolute assurance of our salvation, we do have great confidence that God will give us the grace to persevere in faith and be saved."¹ "God provides the power (or grace) to live out our faith,"² but the obedience of the believer in corporation with God's grace is necessary if he is to obtain eternal life. Perseverance therefore is a choice.

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Those in the Arminian tradition believe “that through the power of the indwelling Spirit the new people of God would be enabled to live in righteousness and true holiness all their lives.”³ From their perspective salvation is lost only if one chooses not to walk obediently. Perseverance is a choice.

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Likewise, choosing to obey is the basis of Christian living in the Free Grace position. Eternal life is never affected by wayward living. Eternal life is a settled issue at salvation, whereas perseverance in abundant living is a choice.

As previously discussed in *Myth 4: Grace Causes Good Works*, believers cooperate with God in choosing to obey His commands for sanctification in Roman Catholic, Arminian, and Free Grace theology. On the other hand Reformed theology uniquely understands that sanctification is accomplished exclusively by God’s grace. R. C. Sproul writes, “The perseverance of the saints could more accurately be call the preservation of the saints....God’s preserving grace makes our perseverance both possible and actual.”⁴ So does the Reformed position teach a perseverance *of* the saints or perseverance *by* the saints?

Perseverance *of* the Saints by God

Reformed theology’s perseverance of the saints in good works until the end of life provides verifiable evidence that a person possesses saving faith. In fact the visible proof of that perseverance became the Reformer’s defense against Rome’s accusation of antinomianism and has become the flash point in the controversy between the Reformed and Free Grace positions (see *Myth 1*).

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L. Berkhof comments as follows on the Reformed view of the perseverance of the saints.

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is to the effect that they whom God has regenerated and effectually called to the state of grace, can neither totally nor finally fall away from that state, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved.⁵

Berkhof emphatically indicates that it is God alone who does the persevering, not man—perseverance does not depend upon man.⁶ Sanctification is solely the actual activity of God.⁷ As a result the explanation for Reformed doctrine of perseverance follows:

Perseverance may be defined as *that continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion.*⁸

L. Berkhof

Indeed the believer does persevere in faith and godliness, but this is due to the gracious work of God in his behalf. More accurate that perseverance is preservation. We persevere because we are preserved by God....Only because we are *preserved by grace* are we able to persevere at all.⁹

R. C. Sproul

Reformed doctrine of perseverance says that all who were chosen, redeemed, and regenerated by God are eternally saved and are *kept in faith by the power of God*. They *must and will*, therefore, *persevere* in holiness to the end.¹⁰

Keith Mathison

There is no way we can fail to persevere....To allow for such a possibility is a disastrous misunderstanding of *God's keeping power* in the lives of His chosen ones.¹¹

John MacArthur

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The Reformed understanding of *God's keeping power* was addressed in *Myth 4*. There, according to the Reformed view, we discovered that, through operative grace, God energizes and activates good works through the believer. As a result, being kept by the power of God in the state of grace is evident in the continued good works of the believer.

Giving further clarification to the doctrine of perseverance, John Murray discusses what perseverance is not.

In order to place the doctrine of perseverance in proper light we need to know what it is not. It does not mean that every one who professes faith in Christ and who is accepted as a believer in the fellowship of the saints is secure for eternity and may entertain the assurance of eternal salvation. Our Lord himself warned his followers in the days of his flesh when he said to those Jews who *believed on him*, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye truly my disciples, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31, 32). He set up a criterion by which true disciples might be distinguished, and that criterion is continuance in Jesus's word.... The crucial test of true faith is endurance to the end, abiding in Christ, and continuance in his word.¹²

However, contrary to Murray's view, John 8:31-32 addresses the disciples who are already believers. It does not present a contrast between "true" believers and unbelievers determined by endurance to the end.¹³ Nevertheless, Murray adds, "It is true that a believer sins; he may fall into grievous sin and backslide for lengthy periods."¹⁴ And MacArthur writes, "Indeed, some Christians persist in sin for extended periods of time."¹⁵ Since God has the power to keep those He chooses, a dilemma arises for the advocate of the Reformed position.¹⁶ If God causes the believer to walk obediently, why aren't His chosen ones living sinless lives? On one hand God can certainly and absolutely cause perseverance in obedience. On

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the other hand the Reformed view indicates that believers may, at least at some time and to some extent, “be overcome by evil and fall in sin.”¹⁷ However, if one sins, regardless of the extent of time or grievous nature of the sin, the Reformed camp teaches that failure proves that the person is not a “true” believer.¹⁸ A supporter says, “If a person turns against Christ, it is proof that person was never saved.”¹⁹

Suppose a believer falls and turns away from Christ. R. C. Sproul provides the standard two-option Reformed response to this problem when he says,

We consider two possibilities....The *first* possibility is that their profession was not genuine in the first place....The *second* possible explanation...is that they are true believers who have fallen into serious and radical apostasy, but who will repent of their sins and be restored before they die. If they persist in apostasy until death, then theirs is a full and final fall from grace, which is evidence that they were not genuine believers in the first place.²⁰

For the Reformed view sin reveals that the person either (1) was never a believer or (2) was a believer and will repent eventually and be restored. These two options, however, fail to address the serious implications that the Reformed camp conveniently ignores.

In their zeal to rectify the error that meritorious works produce salvation, the Reformers slipped into the erroneous concept of God’s grace accomplishing the entire process of justification and sanctification without cooperation by the believer. In the Reformed view believers are merely channels

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for the grace of God. Since present sanctification is maintained by operative grace, the believer will obviously persevere to the end.

In summary, the Reformed view's dilemma is neither a tension (e.g., God is three persons, yet one God) nor a paradox (e.g., to lose life is to find life). It is in fact a contradiction, which the following illustrates:

Since "*Causing to Walk*"²¹

requires the continuous energizing work of the Spirit
requires operative grace continuously causing obedience
requires nonmeritorious participation by believers

and

Since "*Saving Faith*"²²

requires continuous perseverance in good works
requires continuous enduring faith
requires continuous commitment of life
requires continuous active faith

If a person sins, it indicates:

Faith is not continuously enduring
The Spirit is not continuously energizing
Good works are not continuously occurring

The *only conclusion is that saving faith does not exist*. The person is not a believer! Therefore the assertion that "Christians can persist in sin for extended periods of time" is not consistent with and is a contradiction of their definition of saving faith.

Perseverance *by* the Saints

Perseverance by the believer in good works is a biblical concept and is in fact God's desire for each believer. However, this is different from the Reformed view. The two perspectives are revealed in the question, "Are good works accomplished *by grace or by choice*?"

Of course God is involved in the Christian life. The distinction here is as to (1) whether the believer cooperates with the Spirit by choosing to walk obediently or (2) whether God activates and causes an obedient walk Himself. The former is representative of the Fee

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Grace view, and the latter is the Reformed view. Each understands Ephesians 2:10 differently. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” The Reformed view understands that the good works of Ephesians 2:10 *will* now be a reality since they were an impossibility before the believer’s new position. The Free Grace position is that the good works of Ephesians 2:10 *can* now be accomplished since (1) they were an impossibility before the believer’s new position and (2) the believer can now choose to participate obediently with God.

In the Reformed system good works *will occur* by God’s operative grace. In the Free Grace system, good works *can occur* through obedient choices made by the believer, as the Spirit fills, leads, and teaches. The distinction is whether it is by grace alone or by choice. That difference is critical. The Reformed position understands that God guarantees both justification and present sanctification. But the Free Grace position is that God guarantees justification but not present sanctification. The Free Grace position embraces the *once saved, always saved* teaching, based on salvation through faith alone. But God graciously allows believers to choose whether to cooperate with the Spirit in the Christian life, with the possibility of experiencing either an exemplary or a pathetic performance. That outcome, whether good or bad, does not affect the believer’s position in Christ. One’s relationship or justification does not change; however, fellowship or present sanctification can and does vacillate.

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The desire for believers to persevere in good works and to become more Christlike is evident from the Scriptures. “Do you

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not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win” (1 Cor. 9:24). “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). Perseverance is a reflection of a believer’s position in Christ. Faithful obedience, motivated by gratitude for God’s work of salvation, results in growth, maturity, and conformity to Christ. On the other hand disobedience never reflects Christ. At His return, the obedience of each believer will be evaluated. Motives will be revealed and works will be evaluated as to whether they are valuable or worthless (1 Cor. 3:13-15; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 2:23). This future judgment may result in commendation for faithful service, or the forfeiture of rewards. But one’s salvation will not be affected.

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

Are good works a product of God’s grace or of man’s choice? The correct answer is “Both.” Good works involve both God’s activity and man’s choice. However, the Reformed operative-grace position is not the same as the concept of man’s choice as seen in the Free Grace position. The Spirit is not the energizer causing good works. Rather, the Spirit fills, leads, and instructs the believer in his pursuit of Christlikeness. Believers have a secure position in Christ, and potentially they can reflect their position through good works, thereby expressing Christlikeness. Believers ought not lose sight of that goal. To persevere is a matter of choice!

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Myth 6, NOTES

1. Alan Schreck, *Catholic & Christian* (Cincinnati: Servant, 1984), 41.
2. *Ibid.*, 26.
3. Melvin E. Dieter, “Wesleyan Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Melvin E. Dieter (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 28.
4. R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 210.
5. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 545.
6. *Ibid.*, 546.
7. Ken Neff, *Rethinking Empowerment* (St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2011), 169-77.
8. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 546; (italics his).
9. Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 197 (italics added).
10. Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 76 (italics added).
11. John F. MacArthur Jr., *Faith Works* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 189 (italics added).
12. John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 151-52 (italics added).
13. Ken Neff, *Hold Fast* (St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2010), 50.

The term “disciple” can refer to various categories of disciples. “Not only are unbelievers called disciples (Matt. 22:16) but also there are differences between the believing followers (disciples) that were in the crowd and the intimate followers like the Twelve.”
14. Murray, *Redemption*, 154.
15. MacArthur, *Faith Works*, 190.
16. Proponents of the Reformed view are not the same. For example John MacArthur is a premillennialist but Reformed in his view of salvation and the Christian life. John Murray and R. C. Sproul are amillennial-

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ists, embracing the entire Reformed tradition. Each, however, face the same contradictions in their position.

17. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 546.
18. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?*, 76.
19. John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According To Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 98.
20. Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 208-9 (italics added).
21. See *Myth 4, Grace Causes Good Works*, and *Myth 7, Spirit's Power Causes Christian Walk*.
22. See *Myth 2, Faith Is Active*; *Myth 3, Faith Is a Tricky Word*; and *Myth 10, Perseverance Required* in *Hold Fast*.