

It's not within us to persevere, but persevere we must! (From Jonathan Edwards)

(A word of warning to certain friends who identify as "reformed.")

Some of my writings warn Christians to diligently watch and pray daily so that they do not turn away from following Jesus. Some friends who identify as "reformed" have objected to some things I have written on this subject because, in their minds, these writings seem to imply that God has left our persevering strictly in our hands. When asked if they consider it possible that they could apostatize, certain of them say, "No, it cannot happen." My heart goes out to these people because they are living the Christian life with a damaged girdle of truth. This makes them vulnerable to apostasy because, due to their mindset, they cannot derive the intended benefit from the abundant Scripture that God has provided (as a means of grace) to keep them from **falling away**.¹ These people appear to be insulated from such Scripture. It **appears to me**² that they see these Scriptures as if they are hypothetical and not directly applicable to them personally.

Because I am truly burdened for these friends, I write this article mainly to show them, (in case they do not yet know), that their position is not shared by many reformed theologians, especially those who lived long ago. In the process, I want also to make sure these friends understand that I am not preaching a doctrine contrary to Scripture! (I suspect that some might falsely assume that I am teaching that God has left our persevering up to us. This is not the case!)

Because I do not have time to analyze the writings of multiple reformed theologians, I will restrict my observations to just one, Jonathan Edwards, who lived over 200 years ago. I have a profound respect for this man and hold to most of his views.³ All of the quotations from Jonathan Edwards are taken from ***The Works of Jonathan Edwards Volume 2***, printed by Camelot Press Ltd. Southampton, in 1986, and published by Banner of Truth Trust.⁴ All quotes are taken from the article ***"Of the perseverance of the saints"*** beginning on page 596. (A note of caution, if you search for this on the web, be careful because I have noticed that many of the websites only include portions of the article instead of the entire article. I don't understand why they would do this while not calling attention to it. Perhaps it contains some words that they don't like. I just don't know.)

The article contains some deductive reasoning of Jonathan Edwards. I often caution people about the dangers of relying too much on deductive reasoning. But in this article, I noticed that he seems to submit his deductions to the Word of God rather than visa versa. I wish more theologians did this.

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints includes two subjects that, to some, seem dissonant to each other. These two subjects are 1) God's election (which guarantees perseverance) and 2) the Christian's responsibility to diligently persevere so that he does not perish. Because these doctrines don't seem to harmonize logically, there is a natural tendency to pay attention to one over the other. When this happens, reverent loyalty to God's clear revelation (in His Word) is often replaced by theological deductions that are erroneous and therefore, dangerous.

From reading Jonathan Edwards' article, it appears to me that he held strongly to the doctrine of election while warning Christians that they must diligently persevere lest they perish. (This is what I try to do also.)

Before examining the Edwards article, let me point out the dangerous outcome of paying attention to one of these doctrines over the other. Say a Christian rejects the teaching that God's election ensures that Christians will persevere. Such a person might rightly believe that in order to lay hold of his ultimate salvation, he must persevere

¹ To see some of them, [click this link](#).

² Since I cannot know the inner operation of their heart and mind, I cannot know for sure why they seem unable to embrace these Scriptures. This is why I use the phrase, "it appears to me."

³ For example, unlike him, I am not a cessationist and my views on sabbath keeping are different from his.

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unto the end. However, he also might falsely conclude that whether or not he perseveres is completely up to his own will. This position exalts man and contradicts Jesus' teaching that without Him, we can do nothing (including persevere). (See John 15:5.)

On the other hand, say a Christian rightly holds to the doctrine of election. Such a person might falsely conclude that since God's election ensures Christians will persevere to the end, there is no need to diligently pray and pay attention (lest he drift away and perish). Such a person will be vulnerable to apostasy because he is believing doctrines of men that are distorted. (They diminish the sense of urgency to watch and pray.)

Both of these distortions diminish the Christian's sense of urgency to pray that God helps him persevere. The Christian who believes his perseverance is entirely up to his own will tends to lean upon his own determination to persevere (since it is entirely up to his own will). The Christian who believes that his enduring is already a done deal (due to God's election) tends not to ask God for help to endure since in his mind, it is already a forgone conclusion that he will indeed persevere because his election by God has already determined it.

Observations from the Jonathan Edwards' article:

First, from his opening words of the article, we read that Jonathan Edwards taught about both God's election and our role in persevering with all diligence.

In the beginning of his article on perseverance, he references some words that appear in his prior article "**VI, Concerning Faith.**" You can skip over them (first paragraph below) if you wish but I felt a responsibility to include them in case you want to see them.

"The gospel is the revelation of the way of life by faith in Christ. Therefore, he who teaches something else to be that faith, which is essentially diverse from what the gospel of Christ teaches, he teaches another gospel; and he does in effect teach another religion than the religion of Christ. For what is religion, but the way of exercising our respect to God, which is the term of his favor and acceptance to a title to eternal rewards? The Scripture teaches this, in a special manner, to be saving faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, he that teaches another faith instead of this, teaches another religion. Such doctrines as I have opposed, must be destructive and damning. i.e. directly tending to man's damnation; leading such as embrace it, to rest in something essentially different from the grand condition of salvation. And therefore, I would advise you, as you would have any regard to your own soul's salvation, and to the salvation of your posterity, to beware of such doctrine as this."

Now, below are his opening words of his article on perseverance:

"There is just the same reason for those commands of earnest care and laborious endeavours for perseverance, and threatenings of defection, notwithstanding its being certain that all that have true grace shall persevere, as there is for earnest endeavours after godliness, and to make our calling and election sure, notwithstanding that all that are elected shall undoubtedly be saved. For as the case with respect to this is the same, decree or no decree, everyone that believes shall be saved, and he that believes not shall be damned. They that will not live godly lives, find out for themselves that they are not elected; they that will live godly lives, have found out for themselves that they are elected. So it is here: he that to his utmost endeavors to persevere in ways of obedience, finds out that his obedience and righteousness are true; and he that does not, discovers that his is false.

As persons are commanded and counselled to repent and be converted, though it is already determined whether they shall be converted or no; after the same manner, and with the same propriety, persons are commanded and counselled to persevere."

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“...So that there is as much need of persons exercising care and diligence in order to their salvation, as there is of their attention and care to repent and be converted. For our own care and diligence is as much the proper and decreed means of perseverance, as of any thing else.” (from p 596, paragraph 1& 2)

Let me (Tom Bear) make a few comments about Jonathan Edward’s words shown above. Notice that when he speaks of salvation, he is referring not to conversion but to the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In his article, he holds to both the doctrine of election (that guarantees perseverance of the elect) while at the same time, he teaches that Christians must exercise diligence in persevering to lay hold of that salvation. Also notice how he takes great care to hold to both the truth about election while teaching about our duty to diligently persevere so that we do not perish.

The next passage highlights the absolute importance of God’s role in our perseverance. (Note: When he speaks about man’s **perfect state**, he is referring to Adam’s pre-fallen condition.)

“God, when he had laid out himself to glorify his mercy and grace in the redemption of poor fallen men, did not see meet, that those who are redeemed by Christ, should be redeemed so imperfectly, as still to have the work of perseverance left in their own hands. They had been found already insufficient for this in their perfect state, and are now ten times more liable than formerly to fall away and not to persevere, if in their fallen broken state, with their imperfect sanctification, the care of the matter be entrusted with them.....the poor creature sees his own insufficiency to stand.” (from p.596 paragraph 5.)

Jonathan Edwards held strongly to the doctrine of divine election. But he also taught about the importance of the duty of Christians to exercise diligence so that they persevere unto the salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Concerning perseverance, he also wrote:

“...though it is not that [perseverance] by which we first come to have a title to eternal life, yet it is necessary in order to actual possession of it, as the way to it; that it is as impossible we should come to it without perseverance, as it is impossible for a man to go to a city or town, without travelling throughout the road that leads to it. But we are really saved by perseverance; so that salvation has a dependence on perseverance, as that which influences in the affair, so as to render it congruous that we should be saved. Faith (on our part) is the great condition of salvation; it is that by faith we are justified and saved. But in this faith, the perseverance that belongs to it is a fundamental ground of the congruity that faith gives to salvation.” (From p. 598 paragraph 8.) [The word “perseverance” in brackets is mine to help clarify.]

He went so far as to say in paragraph 9:

“therefore, subsequent acts of faith may be said to give a sinner a title to salvation, as well as the first.” (By “first,” he means the initial acts of faith that accompanied conversion.)

Edwards talked about the mindset of Paul to live as if the end had not yet been determined. (Paul made full use of means and endeavors so that the promised outcome would come to pass.)

“When St. Paul kept his body under control lest he should be a castaway (I Cor. 9:27), he did no otherwise than he was wont to do in temporal concerns, in cases wherein he was beforehand certain of the event. So, he sent word to the chief captain about the Jews lying in wait to kill him, lest he should be murdered by them, though it was revealed to him from God, but the very night before, that he should live to see Rome; (Acts 23:12-21). So he would not allow the soldiers to leave the ship (Acts 27).” (From p. 602, paragraph 26.)

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(I, Tom Bear, also recommend Phil 3:8-15 because it shows how Paul lived as if his resurrection was not a done deal.)

Edwards also brought up the example of Jesus to show that we must pray and exercise diligence so that we don't fall away:

It was **impossible**⁵ for Christ to fail under his trials; and yet how evident is it that he used means, endeavors, care, labor, and earnest prayers, that he might persevere.....The reason is plain: prayer is one kind of seeking the thing; it is using means, and one way of laboring for it, taking care to obtain it, and pursuing it. (From page 602, paragraph 29.)

From this article, we see that Jonathan Edwards taught both the doctrine of election which insures perseverance, and also our duty to exercise diligence SO THAT we do endure. These days, there are some "reformed" Christians who teach that based on the doctrine of election, our ultimate salvation can be considered a done deal. I wrote this article to show that not all reformed theologians hold to that teaching.

If you are one of the many people that believe you are all set and your ultimate salvation is a done deal, you are insulating yourself from hundreds of warnings in the New Testament to take heed so that you do not fall away. Do you pray often that God would keep you from falling away? If not, you are failing to take advantage of one of God's primary means necessary to keep you from falling away. Your distorted theological deductions are putting you in great spiritual danger. I plead with you to discard any deductions that may be diminishing your sense of urgency to diligently watch and pray so that you persevere unto salvation!

If you want to examine many Scriptures that back up what is said here, [click this link to a pdf file on the Stones Cry Out website.](#)

Note: I will mention another widespread distortion that diminishes a Christian's sense of urgency to pray and pay attention so that they persevere and do not fall away. Many churches teach that our ultimate salvation is guaranteed on the basis of a one-time act of faith (or experience) in our past. The Bible teaches that true believing does not stop. Only those who believe and continue to believe will be saved in the end. For more about this, see my book, ["Finish."](#)

⁵ I disagree with Edward's choice of the word "impossible" here. I believe it relies upon his deductive reasoning. Instead, he should have followed Luke's example and said how Jesus was delivered by the determined purposes and foreknowledge of God to be crucified, and yet... how evident is it that he used means, endeavors, care, labor, and earnest prayers, that he might persevere (unto death). (See Luke's wording in Acts 2:23.)