

Once saved, always... stubborn?

by R H Johnston

1. Introduction

That a Christian can have assurance that God will not fail to save those to whom He has promised salvation is important to every Christian. God is not capricious, promising to save us one day, but changing His mind without cause the next. God is faithful to His promises, and this is widely taught in scripture. God is consistent, and will not change what He has promised to do: thus, "*If we endure, we shall also reign with Him, if we deny Him, He also will deny us*" (2 Timothy 2:12). If any doubt that God's sure promises are conditional on our attitudes to Him in our daily walk they would do well to start by reflecting on the fate of the house of Eli (1 Samuel 2:30-35).

Unfortunately this wholesome doctrine of our assurance of salvation has been caricatured. The idea that once someone has made a profession of faith in Christ, and is "saved", that person can never lose their salvation is a teaching which has achieved wide currency in parts of the church, especially in Reformed and Brethren circles. It is doubtless a comfortable teaching, but it fails to find any support from scripture, rightly understood, and violates the very many scriptures which emphasise the need for a continuing obedient walk with God. This note, does not attempt a comprehensive treatment of the subject of salvation, but simply examines the case made for the doctrine by a leading "Reformed" writer, to see if there is a case to answer.

2. What evidence is put forward by proponents of the doctrine?

Louis Berkhof is an authoritative writer on "Reformed" doctrine. His "A Summary of Christian Doctrine", first published in the USA in 1938, was republished in Britain by Banner of Truth in 1960. What does this influential writer rely on?

2.1 Berkhof on perseverance

Berkhof defines his doctrine of perseverance 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*".

This statement would be reasonable, if it were balanced by recognising the need for the "believer" to go on believing to make this effective, a balance between the work of God and the work of man which is consistently maintained in scripture (see e.g. Philippians 2:12-13). Berkhof does not recognise the need for such a

balance but makes this God-centredness absolute, as if it were solely God's responsibility. Given the over-emphasis in Reformed doctrine on God's sovereignty at the expense of man's responsibility such an oversight is perhaps not surprising. That the doctrine should find favour in the Arminian culture of the Brethren, who put great emphasis on the free availability of Christ to all and who place relatively little emphasis on God's part in drawing men to salvation, is altogether astonishing.

Berkhof claims that the above doctrine is "*clearly taught in Scripture, John 10:28,29; Romans 11:29; Philippians 1:6, 2 Thessalonians 3:3; 2 Timothy 1:12;4:18*".

Let us examine each of these scriptures in turn.

- **John 10:28,29.** "*And I give (present indicative active) unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish (2nd aorist subjunctive middle), and no one shall snatch (future indicative active) them out of my hand. My Father, who hath given (perfect indicative active) them unto me, is greater than all; and no one is able (present indicative middle or passive deponent) to snatch (present infinitive active) them out of the Father's hand.*" (ASV, quoted in Berkhof, tenses from original Greek)

The context of the above verses are important. Jesus is contrasting his sheep in v27 with the unbelieving attitudes of those who do not believe (v25- 26): "*Jesus answered (Aorist Indicative Middle deponent) them, "I told (2nd aorist indicative active) you, and you do not believe (present indicative active); the works that I do (present indicative active) in My Father's name, these bear witness (present indicative active) of Me. But you do not believe (present indicative active), because you are (present indicative) not of My sheep. My sheep hear (present indicative active) My voice, and I know (present indicative active) them, and they follow (present indicative active) Me;" (John 10:25-27, NASB, tenses from Greek).*

The Greek present tense never represents a point action (which are expressed by the aorist tense in Greek). The Greek present expresses the idea of present continuity - as does the English "I am giving". Thus the contrast revealed in v25-27 is between those who are living in unbelief and those who are living in faith and who are continuing to hear and to follow. Verse 28 therefore says that Christ is giving them eternal life (living a life is far more than having experienced a birth, important as that is as the only means of entry into life). They will never perish: the tense of perish, although subjunctive, is that special emphatic negative future form implying certainty, and this might seem conclusive. However the context implies that this is conditional on the sheep hearing his voice, and

following and receiving the continual supply of eternal life. The rest of the verse shows that no *third party* can snatch them from Jesus or from the Father. This does not mean that sheep who cease to hear, follow and believe are immune from being lost.

- **Romans 11:29.** "*For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance*". This is a classic case of dragging a verse from its context to make it appear to mean something *which the same passage denies*. This verse properly concerns God's faithfulness towards His people Israel in spite of their sins, not for their own sake - for, as Romans 9-11 amply proves, many *individuals* have failed to enter the promised blessings - but in order to fulfil God's promise to Abraham, God promises that a remnant shall be saved and inherit the promises. Romans 11:18-22 deals specifically with *individuals* who choose to be presumptuous. Unlike the rest of the passage which is in the plural dealing with the people of Israel, these five verses are all in the singular, and verse 22 says: "*Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness; otherwise thou also shalt be cut off*" (AV). The individual is only secure while he continues in God's goodness, without presumption.
- **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 Christ.*" (AV). This rightly emphasises Paul's confidence in God's part in their salvation; nevertheless Paul does not take this in any way for granted as is shown by the prayer which follows, and the fact that he felt it desirable to write the Philippians a letter. His confidence was in any case based on the generally good attitude to God which the Philippians had and which he commended. He did not make statements like this to those churches which had serious problems.
- **2 Thessalonians 3:3.** "*But the Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you, and keep you from evil.*" This verse emphasises God's protective hand against third party interference - we certainly do need protection from the devil and his agents! The verses that follow suggest that Paul had good reason for the confidence he expressed that the Christians at Thessalonica would obey his commands, and that they would be discriminating in their conduct to protect themselves from disorderly brothers. (2 Thessalonians 3:4-6). Once again this is seen not to be an absolute text, but one which is balanced by a context of things which the Christians themselves had to do towards their own protection.
- **2 Timothy 1:12.** "*For which cause I suffer (present indicative active) also these things: yet am I not ashamed (present indicative middle or passive deponent); for I know (perfect indicative active) Him whom I have believed (perfect indicative active), and I am persuaded (perfect indicative passive) that He is (present indicative) able to guard (aorist infinitive active) that*

which I have committed unto Him against that day." (ASV, quoted in Berkhof)

The perfect indicative speaks of an act in the past giving rise to a continuing present state of the same thing. Thus on the basis of his past and continuing knowing, believing and being persuaded, Paul has confidence that God will keep him whenever there is a time of pressure arising from the sufferings he is experiencing (see 2 Timothy 4:16-18). Again all of this is dependent on his continuing walk with God, and 2 Timothy 1:12 is neatly complemented by 2 Timothy 1:13-14 which place a firm emphasis on the need for Timothy to act appropriately.

- **2 Timothy 4:18.** "*The Lord will deliver me from every evil work, and will save me unto His heavenly kingdom: to whom be the glory for ever and ever.*" (ASV, quoted in Berkhof). This expresses Paul's confidence in God keeping him (2 Timothy 4:17) in a context where he is being failed by men (2 Timothy 4:16), and subject to heavy pressure from third parties. As with all the previous verses, such a verse is hardly relevant to those who are careless about their faith.

These scriptures do give the Christian who is walking with God the confidence to deal with all the circumstances in which he finds himself. The conditions are unambiguous, but ***they provide no comfort for those who wish to live in a worldly fashion.***

2.2 Berkhof on Assurance of Salvation

Berkhof continues immediately after the above statement on perseverance: "*And it is only when we believe in this perseverance of God that we can in this life attain to the assurance of salvation, Hebrews 3:14; 6:11; 10:22; 2 Peter 1:10.*"

It is true that the verses already considered have that effect for the Christian who is walking with God. The verses quoted provide us with the assurance that God will not let us down, and that no third party can undo our salvation.

Berkhof cites the above verses for the sole purpose of showing that the ***concept*** of assurance exists in scripture: he seems to be simply relying on the presence of the word "assurance" in the first three of these verses, rather than on examining the truth the verses contain. On examination, they prove that the Christian can have assurance of salvation when we approach God provided that he satisfies the appropriate conditions. Berkhof however, ignores entirely the associated conditions, which entirely demolish his suggestion that Christians will be saved irrespective of their conduct, for they prove our need to "*hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end.*" (Hebrews 3:14) and, to use a lawyer's

phrase, "show due diligence" (Hebrews 6:11), and "*hold fast the profession of faith without wavering*" (Hebrews 11:23):

- **Hebrews 3:14.** "*For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end.*" (AV)
- **Hebrews 6:11** "*And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end.*" (AV)
- **Hebrews 10:22.** "*Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.*" (AV)

The last scripture (2 Peter 1:10) makes clear we can secure our ultimate salvation through due diligence, but there is no promise there that somehow we can do a point action which will thereafter secure our salvation irrespective of what we do thereafter:

- **2 Peter 1:10** "*Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if you do these things, ye shall never fall.*" (AV)

This tendency to ignore the conditions associated with the promises in scripture is, in my experience, characteristic of those who hold this doctrine.

2.3 How Berkhof deals with objections to the doctrine

Berkhof then continues: "*outside of Reformed circles this doctrine find[sic] no favour. It is said to be contradicted by Scripture, which warns against apostasy, Hebrews 2:1; 10:26, exhorts believers to continue in the way of salvation, Matthew 24:13; Colossians 1:23; Hebrews 3:14, and even records cases of apostasy, 1 Timothy 1:19,20; 2 Timothy 2:17,18; 4:10. Such warnings and exhortations would seem to assume the possibility of falling away, and such cases would seem to prove it completely. But as a matter of fact the warnings and exhortations prove only that God works mediately and wants man to co-operate in the work of perseverance; and there is no proof that the apostates mentioned were real believers. Cf. Romans 9:6; 1 John 2:19; Revelation 3:1.*"

2.4 Berkhof fails to present a case needing an answer

On the basis of Berkhof's writings we must conclude that there is really no case to answer. He admits that God works mediately and wants man to co-operate in the work of perseverance. If men fail to do so, then how can they be saved? If God can save them without and apart from such co-operation, what is the point of the hard and possibly unpleasant work of undertaking such co-operation?

The crucial significance of Berkhof's last point, his suggestion that the apostates may not have been real believers, must not be overlooked. Once this idea is accepted, the alleged purpose of the doctrine - to provide security comfort to the Christian - is thereby completely nullified. Most proponents of the doctrine are usually aware of people, like these apostates, who made a very good profession, and who walked closely with God for sometime thereafter, before going on to deny their faith completely. As in this case, such people are dismissed as having never been Christians in the first place. This may serve to save the doctrine from repudiation, but this thereby eliminates any *real* assurance for those presently believing in Christ, for who can say whether he will not himself eventually turn out to one who denies the faith? It is "*he who endures to the end who will be saved*". (Matthew 10:22, compare Philippians 3:2-16). Thus, we have shown that, not only is the teaching unbiblical, but it fails in its objective of providing the desired permanent assurance of salvation. The doctrine is not only a delusion, its purported benefits also turn out to be an illusion!

In summary, Berkhof proves that assurance of salvation exists. He assumes, but does not prove, that this means that no Christian can lose his salvation irrespective of his conduct. He then assumes, but fails to prove, that once someone becomes a real Christian then their "assured position" persists irrespective of their life-style and of their diligence in their continuance in the faith. Indeed the very verses he quotes disprove his case.

3. Conclusions

Louis Berkhof, a leading proponent of the doctrine of "Once saved, always saved" has been shown to rely on scriptures do not prove that doctrine, but instead show the true biblical doctrine of assurance, namely:

- a) The concept of assurance of salvation exists - God will not rescind what He has promised to do for us.
- b) assurance of salvation depends on a continuing walk in obedience towards God and faith in Jesus Christ.

The main problem with the "once saved, always saved" doctrine, is that people come to rely on an experience which took place long ago. This often leads to a smug complacency, and, ultimately, stubbornness of heart.

We cannot be saved by a doctrine, nor by an experience: true assurance rests in our continuing relationship with a Saviour Jesus Christ, obeying the scriptural commands to continuously maintain and enhance a close walk with God, and adding to our faith those things which will make certain our call and election. Peter tells us if we do these things we shall never fall but enter His kingdom (2 Peter 1:4-11).

These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk). (Editions 8 Nov 1996, 2.10.1997, 8.10.1997, 5.9.2018)

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