

# Augustine and Owen On Perseverance

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Although Augustine wrote two major treatises focusing upon the doctrine of perseverance and commented on the doctrine in various other works,<sup>1</sup> there is a significant lack of studies examining his thought or its influence on the development of Christian theology. There are a few notable exceptions which examine the role of perseverance in Augustine's overall thought, trace Augustine's doctrine through the medieval doctors, and even focus upon the major treatises themselves.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the absence of detailed study on this aspect of Augustine's work manifests itself in the confusion evident in the limited literature which does exist.

Most surveys of perseverance are content to note Augustine as the original formulator of the doctrine and the parallels of Augustine's thought with that of the Reformers and their followers.<sup>3</sup> These surveys, as well as other studies,<sup>4</sup> are quick to point out, however, that Augustine's perseverance doctrine differed significantly from the Reformers and the Puritans in its subjective effect on the believer. Whereas Augustine resisted the doctrine's

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tendency to assure the believer of eternal salvation, for the Reformers and Puritans certainty of one's salvation is a main (or the main) function of stressing

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1. *De dono perseverantiae; De correptione et gratia; De gratia et libero arbitrio; De praedestinatione sanctum; In Joannis Evangelium*, LIII; *De doctrina Christiana*, iii:32; *De civitate Dei*, x.23; xi.12; xii.7; xx.6.

2. Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-book of the History of Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 338–50; Henri de Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 92–95; Dennis Martin, "Popular and Monastic Pastoral Issues in the Later Middle Ages," *Church History* 56 (1987) 320-32; Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Medieval Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 157–60; John Gerstner, "Augustine on Irresistible Grace," in H. Vander Goot, ed., *Life Is Religion* (St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1981), 135–58; Mary Lesousky, *The De Dono Perseverantiae of Saint Augustine* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1956).

3. Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 5 (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1897); Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance* (Springfield: Westcott, 1975); G. T. Thompson, "Assurance," *Evangelical Quarterly* 14 (1942) 2-8; Louis Berkhof, *The Assurance of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Smitter Book Co., 1928); G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958); D. A. Carson, "Reflections on Assurance," in T. Schreiner and B. Ware, eds., *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 383–412; Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932).

4. Mark Vanderschaaf, "Predestination and Certainty of Salvation in Augustine and Calvin," *Reformed Review* 30 (1976) 1-8; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939).

the gift of perseverance.<sup>5</sup> However, this assessment is far from universally held; numerous writers maintain that Augustine did hold a weak doctrine of personal assurance, implying that if a believer is living faithfully he may assure himself that he will persevere and hence is part of the elect.<sup>6</sup> Others insist that Augustine's hesitancy to adopt a doctrine of personal assurance reveals the "curious nature" of his views on perseverance and that ultimately "Augustine's doctrine of perseverance was quite unlike that of the Protestant Reformers."<sup>7</sup>

This essay will seek to establish the level of continuity and difference which exists between Augustine's understanding of perseverance and that promoted by a representative theologian from seventeenth-century England, the Puritan John Owen. After setting the historical context of the relevant writings and a brief summary of the major argument of the works, the specific formulations of Augustine and Owen on perseverance will be examined; the similarities of the two theologians' thought will be noted and an assessment of what may account for their differences will be attempted.

### I. Augustine's *De correptione et gratia*

It appears that Augustine's comments in his letter to Sixtus on the completely gratuitous nature of grace as a gift of God and the denial of all human merit before its reception caused quite a stir in the monastery at Hadrumetum. A number within the monastery opposed this teaching since it seemed to set aside their practices of asceticism.<sup>8</sup> When questioned by representatives from the abbey, Augustine wrote a new treatise on grace, *De gratia et libero arbitrio*. In this work, Augustine argues for both the doctrine

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of free will under divine influence and the absolute gratuity of grace. However, on the question of free will, he mainly emphasizes its radical inability to assure the beginning, continuation of, or perseverance of the saint into eternal life.

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5. See detailed studies of assurance in Puritan theology in Joel Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); Richard Hawkes, "The Logic of Assurance in English Puritan Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990) 247-61; Philip Hughes, *Theology of the English Reformers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); Gordon Keddie, "'Unfallible Certainty of the Pardon of Sinne and Life Everlasting': The Doctrine of Assurance in the Theology of William Perkins," *Evangelical Quarterly* 48 (1976) 230-44; David King, "The Affective Spirituality of John Owen," *Evangelical Quarterly* 68 (1996) 223-33; John von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

6. Larry Sharp, "The Doctrines of Grace in Calvin and Augustine," *Evangelical Quarterly* 52 (1980) 84-96, esp. 92; J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Associated Publishers and Authors, 1971), 216; John Zens, "The Doctrine of Assurance: A History and an Application," *Baptist Reformation Review* 5 (1976) 34-35.

7. Arthur McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner's, 1954), 96. Cf., Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 11-13; Henry Robins, *The Basis of Assurance in Recent Protestant Theologies* (Kansas City: Charles E. Brown, 1912).

8. Augustine, *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 1, in *NPNF*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 436-65.

Abbot Valentinus assured Augustine that *De gratia et libero arbitrio* was well received and had reestablished peace in the monastery.<sup>9</sup> However, apparently upon reading Augustine's work, some within the monastery concluded, since the continuation and perseverance in grace was a gift of God, that one should not be corrected or blamed for his faults, backsliding, or spiritual failings.<sup>10</sup> In response to this new misunderstanding, Augustine wrote *De correptione et gratia*, where he explicitly rejects this conclusion and affirms the necessity of correction and rebuke for fallen believers. The first section of this treatise treats the efficacy of grace and the importance of discipline and admonition in the Christian life. The remaining portion of the work concerns the grace of perseverance and the consequent role of moral living of the believer. In Augustine's own opinion, *De correptione et gratia* is his fullest and best expression of the gratuitous nature of God's persevering one to the end.<sup>11</sup> He argues here that a believer who loses his faith bears the sole blame for such a loss, but one who retains faith demonstrates the gift of persevering grace. He further argues that no one of the elect perishes—those who in life fall away are, and forever have been, part of the reprobate.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, if one of the elect were to fall away, God would necessarily insure that that person will eventually repent and return to the church.<sup>13</sup> Augustine does not try to delve into the mysteries of why God grants perseverance to some and not to others, but rests upon Paul's words, "Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" ( Rom 11:33 ).<sup>14</sup> The core teaching of this treatise, however, that one's perseverance to the end is solely a work of grace by God, is vividly expressed throughout. It was to defend this understanding of the completely gratuitous nature of persevering grace that led Augustine to write his final work on perseverance, *De dono perseverantiae*.

## II. Augustine's *De dono perseverantiae*

Although the Pelagian heresy, against which Augustine struggled through out the second decade of the fifth century, was condemned by Pope Zozimus in 418, there was a remnant of some Pelagian "heirs" who continued to

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resist the Augustinian formulation of grace. To these thinkers, and their historical counterparts, the name "Semi-pelagians" is now commonly given.<sup>15</sup> Against these

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9. Augustine, *De correptione et gratia*, 1, in *NPNF*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 468–91.

10. *Ibid.*, 2, 3, 5.

11. Augustine, *De dono perseverantiae*, 55, in *NPNF*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 521–52.

12. *De correptione*, 5, 12, 16, 23.

13. *Ibid.*, 16, 23.

14. *Ibid.*, 17.

15. While the term Semi-pelagianism is a relatively modern expression—first appearing only in the sixteenth century—it is clear that the last opponents Augustine lived to write against were those who held beliefs similar, although not identical, to Pelagius.

teachers, Augustine wrote his last treatise on grace which has come down to us in two parts, *De praedestinatione sanctorum* and *De dono perseverantiae*.

*De dono perseverantiae* is addressed to Prosper and Hilary, two supporters of Augustine in Gaul who were attempting to defend the Augustinian notion of grace. It appears that the abbot of the monastery of Saint Victor in Marseilles, John Cassian, doubted the absolute gratuity of grace as described by Augustine in his writings against Pelagius.<sup>16</sup> In doing this, however, Cassian and his followers denied the teaching of Pelagius that natural man has the ability to obtain eternal life apart from the internal work of grace. These Semi-pelagians admitted the necessity of grace for some works and that salvation apart from the merit of Christ is impossible. With Augustine, they accepted the doctrines of original sin, the necessity of baptism, and the importance of the internal work of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, they maintained that the beginning of salvation ( *initium fidei* ) and the believer's perseverance in faith ( *perseverantis fidei* ) to the end depend upon the man himself. They taught that, through one's own natural powers, a person must make a necessary, positive preparation for the reception of God's grace. By piously seeking it, the person attains the necessary gift of grace to live in faith. Similarly, the grace of final perseverance is received when one, without any special assistance from God, perseveres in the initial grace received. In this formulation of perseverance—where the focus is not upon the will of God but on the ability of man—the Semi-pelagians denied the Augustinian concept of predestination, insisting instead that the term referred to God's foreknowledge of those who would of their own accord believe. "The error of the Massilians" resulted from the failure of these men to explain satisfactorily the harmony of two truths—the absolute gratuity of grace and yet the necessity of moral living. Consequently, they concluded that either all grace is not completely gracious, or that man's efforts in holiness are useless. Unwilling to concede the latter, numerous monks in Gaul maintained that both the beginning and end of faith are not gifts of God, but reside in man's power; God does not orient the mind and will of a person to believe and continue in belief, but he grants other graces when asked for in faith. Christ's work is necessary, but no man's will is so depraved

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or destroyed that it cannot will to be cured. Consequently, these teachers seek "to assure us that we have faith itself of ourselves, but that its increase is of God; as if faith were not given to us by Him, but were only increased in us by Him, on the ground of the merit of its having begun from us."<sup>17</sup>

In the first portion of his treatise, *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, Augustine seeks to demonstrate that the initial act of grace in a believer is not the result of one's own natural state or merit, but dependent solely upon God. In opposition to

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16. Much of the history and background to Semi-pelagianism and Augustine's response to the movement can be found in Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London: Faber, 1967), 340–407; Lesousky, *The De Dono Perseverantiae of Saint Augustine*, 1–101; Richard Kyle, "Semi-Pelagianism" in Walter Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1000–1001; Seeberg, *Text-book*, 368–82; Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. IV (Allen: Christian Classics, n.d.), 433–45.

17. *De praedestinatione sanctum*, 3, in *NPNF*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 493–519. Cf., 39, 40, 43.

the semi-pelagians, Augustine taught that the *initium fidei* is completely a gift of God. In *De dono perseverantiae*, Augustine turns to the semi-pelagians' second error concerning perseverance: "Now, however, I am arguing not concerning the beginning of faith, of which, I have already spoken much in the former book, but of that perseverance which must be had even to the end,—which assuredly even the saints, who do the will of God, seek when they say in prayer, 'Thy will be done.'"<sup>18</sup>

Augustine demonstrates that perseverance is a gracious gift of God by examining the testimony of the Scriptures, his own previous writings, and the teaching of the church. The bulk of Augustine's argument, however, centers on the observation that believers daily pray to God for perseverance—if perseverance was not a gift of God, the church would not pray for it. If we pray for perseverance, then we believe that God can grant the perseverance, and hence we demonstrate that it is a gift. If we do not believe this, then our prayers are perfunctory.<sup>19</sup> Along the way, Augustine confronts a number of theological concerns about perseverance. Thus, a bulk of his treatise is taken up with the question of predestination which naturally undergirds his doctrine of perseverance. As before, Augustine also confronts the question of God's motive in choosing some for salvation and passing over others; he answers, "how inscrutable are God's judgements!"<sup>20</sup> Augustine is also not unaware of the pastoral implication of what he is teaching. Thus, he asserts the necessity of teaching perseverance as well as the cautionary nature of one's presentation of the doctrine in the final sections of the treatise.<sup>21</sup>

### III. The Saints' Perseverance in Seventeenth-century England

In rejecting the Reformed formulations of the perseverance of the saints early in the seventeenth century, the Remonstrants in Holland had asserted that "true believers can fall from true faith and can fall into such sins as cannot be consistent with true and justifying faith; not only is it possible

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for this to happen, but it even happens frequently."<sup>22</sup> In England, in the middle of the seventeenth-century, similar arguments were used by devout Puritans who were afraid that the doctrine of perseverance would lead to carnal security, a mind-set detrimental to piety and holiness.<sup>23</sup>

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18. *Ibid.*, 6.

19. *De perseverantiae*, 3–9, 63.

20. *Ibid.*, 18–33.

21. *Ibid.*, 57–62.

22. *Sententiae Remonstrantium*, J. N. Bakhuizen Vanden Brink, *De Nederlandsche Belijenisgeschriften* (Amsterdam, 1940), V.iii, 287.

23. Dewey Wallace, *Puritans and Predestination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 130–44, discusses the rise of a pietistic Arminianism in England.

One such Puritan was John Goodwin. Goodwin (1593–1665) was one of the foremost of the sectarian Arminians—those who separated from the Church of England, retaining much of its Laudian Arminianism, yet sharing the Puritan notions of piety, spirituality and ecclesiastical reform. Goodwin “was one of the most extraordinary men of the age. He was an Arminian and a republican; a man of violence both in politics and religion and whose controversial powers were of the highest order.”<sup>24</sup> He lived his life “estranged, by singular idiosyncrasy of opinions, from all the leading parties of his time” and placed himself “against every man, and had almost every man against him.”<sup>25</sup>

His major work, *Redemption Redeemed*, discusses two points of the conflict between Arminians and Calvinists, universal redemption and the perseverance of the saints; the latter naturally arising out of the former when Goodwin attempted to demonstrate that Christ died for some who ultimately perish, even though for a while they appeared as part of the elect. Goodwin objected to the inconsistency between the promises of perseverance and the exhortations used by the Scriptures and its expositors whereby perseverance may be assured.<sup>26</sup> He was further concerned with the moral consequences of the kind of Calvinism promoted by the more orthodox Puritans. This was especially true of the doctrine of eternal perseverance which he claimed led to a false confidence and moral declension in Christians. “That doctrine which asserteth a possibility even of a final defection from faith, in true believers, well understood, riseth up in the cause of godliness with a far higher hand, than the common opinion about their perseverance.”<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the middle third of Goodwin’s *Redemption Redeemed* is a lengthy critique of the Reformed doctrine of perseverance, and promotes instead “the possibility of the saints’ declining even to destruction.”<sup>28</sup> Following an introduction to the Reformed belief and the counter position, Goodwin spends most of his efforts demonstrating from Scripture the fallibility of the Reformed formulation, and his own biblical grounds for

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asserting the real potential of the final apostasy of true, elect Christians. In *Redemption Redeemed*, Goodwin’s attack on perseverance was, according to one critic, “plausible and imposing, but more showy than solid,” and “like most Arminian writers, he caricatures Calvinism in order to expose it to the dislike of his readers.”<sup>29</sup>

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24. William Orme, *Life of the Reverend John Owen* (Choteau, MT: Gospel Mission, 1981), 91.

25. John Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance Explained and Confirmed*, in *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. XI (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 2. For further biographical information on Goodwin, see Wallace, *Puritans and Predestination*, 108, 130–33; Orme, *Life of John Owen*, 90–92; L. Stephen and S. Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: University Press, 1986), Vol. XXII: 145–48.

26. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance*, 461.

27. John Goodwin, *Apolytrosis Apolytroseos, or Redemption Redeemed* (London, 1651), 364.

28. *Ibid.*, 226.

29. Orme, *Life of John Owen*, 91.

#### IV. John Owen's *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*

Goodwin's *Redemption Redeemed* generated numerous responses from the Reformed camp in England,<sup>30</sup> but by far the most prolific and extensive was produced by John Owen (1616–1683). Owen is widely regarded as the greatest English Puritan theologian. He wrote extensively on theological and pastoral issues and served as the vice-chancellor of Oxford University during Cromwell's Protectorate.<sup>31</sup> Having already dealt with the notion of universal redemption in his treatise, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, Owen discusses the orthodox understanding of perseverance in *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*. Of this work, Joel Beeke claims, “for sheer profundity of thought, thoroughness of exposition, and consistent rigor of application, none in the Reformed camp writing on perseverance and assurance have surpassed Owen's magisterial pen.”<sup>32</sup>

A massive work, Owen's *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* is a systematic rebuttal of Goodwin's rejection of the doctrine. Owen refutes both the individual arguments contained within *Redemption Redeemed* and the overall assumptions of the author. He quickly concedes the presence of backsliders and apostates within the visible church. However, Owen asserts that the Arminian classification of all professors of religion as true, genuine believers is both unscriptural and inaccurate; he demonstrates that the scriptural references to those who fall away refer to those who were never truly elect in the first place.<sup>33</sup> In a positive direction, Owen grounds the doctrine of perseverance in the immutability of the nature of God, his promises, covenant, and eternal purposes. The salvation of God's elect is sure because it is linked ultimately to the unchangeable nature of God

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himself.<sup>34</sup> What most inflamed Owen was not his opponent's opposition to the saints' perseverance, but his distortion of the Reformed doctrine. Goodwin portrayed the notion of believer's security as undermining the Christian's motivation to strive for holiness and godliness. He maintained that the doctrine of perseverance naturally gives rise to lawlessness and disregard for morality, and denied the significance of Scripture's exhortations and commands. Owen, however, points out that God perseveres his saints in holiness, not despite its

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30. Richard Resbury, *Some Stop to the Gangrene of Arminianism Lately Promoted by M. John Goodwin* (London, 1651); Richard Resbury, *The Lightless-Starre, or, Mr. John Goodwin Discovered a Pelagio-Socinian* (London, 1652); George Kendall, *Theokratia, or, A Vindication of the Doctrine Commonly Received in the Reformed Churches Concerning Gods Intentions of Special Grace and Favour to His Elect in the Death of Christ* (London, 1653); George Kendall, *Sancti Sanciti, or, The Common Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints* (London, 1654); Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*.

31. Further biographical information on Owen can be found in Peter Toon, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1971); Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987); Orme, *Life of John Owen*.

32. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 214.

33. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*, 79–107.

34. *Ibid.*, chapters II-IX.

absence. Justification is infallibly linked to *sanctification*, stimulating love and obedience to God. In Owen's opinion, Goodwin had distorted the orthodox understanding by saying it teaches preservation without perseverance. This frustrated Owen who pointed out the complementary truths of the Reformed doctrine: perseverance of the saints coupled with continuing belief, love for God, and the living of godly lives.<sup>35</sup> For Owen, the promise of eternal security went hand in hand with the call to persevere in faithfulness.

In addition to his *Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*, Owen also dealt with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints in two other works; in his exegetical comments on Heb 6:4–6 in his major *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, and a treatise on apostasy entitled *The Nature of Apostasy from the Profession of the Gospel*. The latter work was published at a time when Owen was concerned about the decline in religion, and reflects his pastoral concerns. In it he sought “an inquiry into the nature, causes, and occasions of the present defection that is in the world from the truth, holiness, and worship of the Gospel.”<sup>36</sup> Except for a few introductory comments, the first chapter of this work is simply a word for word rendition of his exegesis of Heb 6:4–6 as laid out in *An Exposition of Hebrews*.<sup>37</sup> The work is a painstaking exposition in which his skills as an exegete and an orthodox theologian coincide.

## V. The Doctrine of Perseverance for Augustine and Owen

The following five points demonstrate the level of correlation and distinction between Augustine's and Owen's formulation of the doctrine of perseverance.

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### 1. Perseverance as a Free Gift of God

The completely gratuitous nature of the gift of perseverance obviously underlies all of Augustine's *De dono perseverantiae*. In the treatise he is attempting to correct the “Semi-pelagian” notion that, while grace is freely given from God when a believer requests it, the responsibility for persevering in faith to the end rests firmly with the believer himself. This goal is plainly stated in the first chapter—“I assert, therefore, that the perseverance by which we persevere in

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35. Robert Peterson, “Christian Assurance: Its Possibility and Foundations,” *Presbyterian* 18 (1992) 10.

36. John Owen, *The Nature of Apostasy from the Profession of the Gospel and the Punishment of Apostates Declared*, in *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. VII (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 11.

37. John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. XXI (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991). In the Gould *Works* edition, pages 11–40 of volume VII correspond directly to pages 67–91 of volume XXI. For convenience, the pagination from the Hebrews commentary will be followed below. Although the treatise on apostasy was published before the third Hebrews volume (which contains the 6:4–6 pericope), from the style of writing, etc., it is most likely that Owen had first completed his exegetical work in the commentary before authoring *The Nature of Apostasy*. See also, John Owen, *A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX*, vol. VI: 324–648; *Two Short Catechisms*, vol. I: 464–94, and *Communion with God*, vol. II: 2–275.

Christ even to the end is the gift of God”—and is frequently reiterated thereafter. For instance,

it is shown with sufficient clearness that the grace of God, which both begins a man’s faith and which enables it to persevere unto the end, is not given according to our merits, but is given according to His own most secret and at the same time most righteous, wise, and beneficent will; since those whom He predestinated, them He also called.<sup>38</sup>

The proof Augustine offers in this work was mentioned above; however, it is worth reemphasizing his main point: by praying for perseverance, as demonstrated through the Lord’s Prayer, Christians show that perseverance is a gift; if it was not a gift, there would be no purpose in praying for it—“for if the Church actually asks these gifts from God, but thinks they are given to her because of herself, she offers not true, but perfunctory (*perfunctorias*), prayers.”<sup>39</sup> Augustine labors here to exalt the grace of God in the whole economy of salvation, from beginning (as stressed in the prior *De praedestinatione sanctorum*) to end. As Mary Lesousky has summarized: “Augustine wrote the *De dono perseverantiae* to defend God’s rights: His right to man’s acknowledging Him as the One Who gives grace, and consequently, His right to man’s petitioning Him for graces needed, and thanking Him for graces received.”<sup>40</sup>

The gratuitous nature of perseverance is also a latent theme in Augustine’s *De correptione et gratia*. While perseverance as a gift of God is not the main thrust of the treatise, this concept is what initiated the monks’ questioning concerning the necessity of pastoral admonitions. These monks reasoned that, if a believer perseveres solely on account of God’s granting to them a free and unmerited gift, then there was no reason for one human to rebuke or correct another’s moral or spiritual failings. Though Augustine spends much of the opening chapters of this book on defining *correptione*, he never relinquishes his insistence on the gracious character of perseverance. “To this indeed, we are not able to deny, that perseverance in good,

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progressing even to the end, is also a great gift of God; and that it exists not save it come from Him of whom it is written, ‘Every best gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.’”<sup>41</sup> For Augustine, the key aspect of the whole discussion was the centrality of God’s grace operating in the

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38. *De perseverantiae*, 33.

39. *Ibid.*, 63; Augustine, *In Joannis Evangelium*, 8, in *NPNF*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 7-452.

40. Lesousky, *The De Dono Perseverantiae of Saint Augustine*, Cf., *De praedestinatione*, 9–10.

41. *De correptione*, 10. See also, 6; 9; 17; 19; 38.

salvation of men; this theme controls his formulation and expression of the doctrine of perseverance.<sup>42</sup>

In *The Saints' Perseverance*, John Owen has a different, though related controlling theme. He tackles those who want to argue that genuine believers can and do fall away totally from grace. Owen assumes that perseverance is part of the gift of salvation which is incurred on believers' behalf by Jesus Christ. While not a central part of his discussion, this gratuitous character of perseverance is nevertheless a foundational assumption in Owen's argumentation. Thus, Owen explicitly mentions Augustine and affirms his opinion that perseverance should be rendered "as a gift superadded to faith and love."<sup>43</sup> Further, Owen recounts the historical occasion of Augustine's *De dono perseverantiae*, of his combat with the semi-pelagians, and notes that his struggle with the Arminian Goodwin exactly parallels that previous battle. Owen approvingly summarizes the goal of Augustine's writings on perseverance: to oppose any notion of perseverance which makes it not to be "the fruit and work of the grace of God in us, but the work and effect of our own endeavours, upon a supply of such means, motives, persuasions, and considerations, as we are or may be furnished withal."<sup>44</sup>

In proving that genuine believers cannot fall away, Owen frequently refers to the gracious nature of perseverance, and plainly mocks Goodwin's teaching that "God hath promised the believer shall persevere in case they persevere!"<sup>45</sup> Countering Goodwin's claim that eternal life is a reward for successful obedience as a Christian, Owen grants that eternal life may be called a reward, but notes:

It is a reward neither procured by (properly and morally, as the deserving cause) nor proportioned unto the obedience of them by whom it is attained. A reward it is that withal is the free gift of God, and an inheritance purchased by Jesus Christ; a reward of bounty, and not of justice, in respect of them upon whom it is bestowed, but only of faithfulness in reference to the promise of it; a reward, by being a gracious encouragement, as the end of our obedience, not as the procurement or desert of it.<sup>46</sup>

A faithful Puritan, Owen also ties perseverance to the covenant of grace; perseverance is effectual, in part, because it is a natural outgrowth of the

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42. See also Augustine's comments on perseverance in *De praedestinatione*, 4.

43. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance*, 21.

44. *Ibid.*, 64.

45. *Ibid.*, 248.

46. *Ibid.*, 503.

covenant of grace within which the believer's salvation is found.<sup>47</sup> On the gracious nature of the gift of perseverance, Augustine and Owen clearly thought along the same lines.

## **2. Perseverance Given to the Elect Who Cannot Lose It**

Although Augustine's writings have caused some confusion on this point,<sup>48</sup> his views on this issue are quite explicit; he firmly maintained that each and every one of the elect had received the gift of perseverance from God, and that they cannot ultimately lose their salvation. Augustine speaks directly about the elect numerous times in *De correptione et gratia* and occasionally in *De dono perseverantiae*. After addressing the necessity of admonitions in *De correptione et gratia*, Augustine asserts that the gift of perseverance is assuredly given to the elect and, on account of that gift, they cannot ultimately fall away from grace.<sup>49</sup> This inability distinguishes them from other believers who are not part of the elect and who will eventually perish in disobedience. Of the elect, however, Augustine forcefully asserts that "no one perishes, because all are elected."<sup>50</sup> "When the gift of God is granted to them...none of the saints fails to keep his perseverance in holiness even to the end."<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the elect cannot commit the sin unto death (1 John 5:16), because their election and perseverance protects them from this sin.<sup>52</sup> Finally, Augustine argues that the elect cannot cease to be elect because their number "is so certain that one can neither be added to them nor taken from them."<sup>53</sup> The salvation of the elect is certain because of the grace of election, and consequently, the certainty of their perseverance is guaranteed.

The inability of the elect to lose their salvation and fail to persevere to the end is the main objective of Owen's work on perseverance. While the certainty of the elects' perseverance is secondary to the gift-status of perseverance for Augustine, Owen's eye is cast directly on the question of ability of a saint to fall from grace. In the Dedicatory Epistle of *The Saints' Perseverance*, Owen outlines his goal:

That you and all the saints of God may yet enjoy that peace and consolation which is in believing that the eternal love of God is immutable, that he is faithful in his promises, that his covenant, ratified in the death of his Son, is unchangeable, that the fruits of the purchase of Christ shall be certainly bestowed on all them for

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47. Ibid., 204-25. Cf., Ferguson, *The Christian Life*, 20-27.

48. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, 96; Robins, *Basis of Assurance*, *passim*.

49. *De correptione*, 13-16.

50. Ibid., 14. Cf., 23.

51. *De perseverantiae*, 9.

52. *De correptione*, 35.

53. Ibid., 39.

whom he died [clearly the elect, for Owen], and that every one who is

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really interested in these things shall be kept unto salvation, is the aim of my present plea and contest.<sup>54</sup>

This purpose Owen faithfully pursues throughout this book, as well as significant arguments to support this notion in his other writings.<sup>55</sup>

Neither Augustine nor Owen, however, denied the possibility that the elect may partially or temporarily fall away from the faith—the reality of perseverance was not seen as a shield against sin, but a promise of the elects’ eventual perseverance through sin. Thus, the main occasion of Augustine’s *De correptione et gratia* is to advocate for the necessity and usefulness of pastoral rebuke and correction. Rebuke is necessary in part because the one offering the admonition is unaware of the elect status of the one he is correcting.

Let no one therefore say that a man must not be rebuked when he deviates from the right way, but that his return and perseverance must only be asked for from the Lord for him. Let no considerate and believing man say this. For if such an one is called according to the purpose, [i.e., elect in Augustine’s sense, see below] beyond all doubt God is co-working for good to him even in the fact of his being rebuked. But since he who rebukes is ignorant whether he is so called, let him do with love what he knows ought to be done; for he knows that such an one ought to be rebuked. God will show either mercy or judgment; mercy, indeed, if he who is rebuked is “made to differ” by the bestowal of grace from the mass of perdition, and is not found among the vessels of wrath which are completed for destruction, but among the vessels of mercy which God has prepared for glory; but judgment, if among the former he is condemned, and is not predestinated among the latter.<sup>56</sup>

Augustine freely acknowledges the possibility of the elect faltering, but “if perchance they deviate from the way, when they are rebuked they are amended,” and “they who for a season wander from the way return, that they may continue unto the end what they had begun to be in good.”<sup>57</sup> A lapse into sin and disobedience occurs even in the elect, yet with the elect, their eventual repentance and renewed faithfulness is guaranteed by God. “The faith of these, which worketh by love, either actually does not fail at all, or, if there are any whose faith

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54. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance*, 5–6.

55. E.g., Owen, *The Nature of Apostasy*, 32–33.

56. *De correptione*, 25. Cf., 10.

57. *Ibid.*, 13; 23.

fails, it is restored before their life is ended, and the iniquity which had intervened is done away, and perseverance even to the end is allotted to them.”<sup>58</sup>

Owen is also well aware of the possibility (even of the actuality) of the elect partially lapsing into sin. Owen was frustrated about the decline in contemporary religion, “that among the generality of professed Christians, the glory and power of Christianity are faded and almost utterly lost,” and responded with his book, *The Nature of Apostasy*<sup>59</sup> In this work, Owen distinguishes

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between partial and total apostasy, warning every believer about the grievous guilt and danger of either kind.<sup>60</sup> Owen cites the example of Peter, who fell into sin, yet recovered, as proof that departure from the way of truth is not necessarily permanent, but the person can be brought back to full communion. “A man may so fall into a way of sin as still to retain in his mind such a principle of light and conviction as may be suitable to his recovery.”<sup>61</sup>

Goodwin, Owen’s opponent, had pointed to the various numbers of believers who fall into sin as proof that believers do indeed lose their salvation. Owen considers this argument very seriously and takes a large portion of his reply to Goodwin to answer this charge.<sup>62</sup> He does not deny the actuality of sin in believers; on the contrary, he persuasively argues for its presence in every believer. However, Owen asserts that this condition proves (1) the presence of two wills operating against one another in every true regenerate person, (2) the inability of sin to ever reign in one who is truly converted, and (3) the lack of total consent given by the believer to sin.<sup>63</sup> In this way, Owen both acknowledges the readily proved existence of sin in believers, yet denies the ultimate victory of that sin over the elect. Once again, on substantial issues concerning the effectual nature of perseverance, Owen parallels Augustine’s presentation closely.

However, the divergent orientations of their respective works do perhaps indicate a significant difference in the approach taken by Augustine and Owen. Augustine grounds his discussion of perseverance in the gratuitous nature of salvation: God, and God alone, is responsible for the believer’s eternal salvation. Thus, for Augustine, the saints’ perseverance is rooted in his overwhelming understanding of grace. As mentioned above, Owen certainly does not dispute this; indeed, it forms a necessary background for his own exposition of the doctrine. Nevertheless, Owen’s writing on perseverance does not center on the grace of God, but on the nature of God itself. *The Saints’ Perseverance* divides

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58. *Ibid.*, 16. Cf., *De perseverantiae*, 15; 19; 33.

59. Owen, *The Nature of Apostasy*, 3. Cf., 11; Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance*, 79.

60. Owen, *The Nature of Apostasy*, 52–60.

61. *Ibid.*, 34.

62. Both chapter I and XV of *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance* refute Goodwin’s charge and individual arguments.

63. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance*, 515–16.

nicely in half—the latter part a polemical response to Goodwin’s *Redemption Redeemed*, and an earlier positive exposition of the doctrine. In this section, Owen grounds the doctrine of perseverance in the immutability of God’s nature, purposes, and covenant.<sup>64</sup> The believer will persevere to the end, not ultimately because of the nature of grace, but because God himself has unchangeably tied himself to the eternal salvation of his chosen people. Joel Beeke notes that in Owen, salvation is secure because “God is immutably engaged to his people by means of his promises which form the heart of the covenant of grace.”<sup>65</sup>

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Such a relationship is irrevocable by definition. Augustine also notes concerning every believer who has been given the gift of perseverance that “none of them perishes, because God is not mistaken,” i.e., perseverance is attached to God’s nature.<sup>66</sup> However, he does not trace out this form of argument, instead focusing upon the absolute gratuity of grace.

This difference between Augustine and Owen, however, does not substantially alter their formulations of the doctrine. As discussed above, both readily acknowledge the freely gracious character of perseverance and its undeniable efficacy for the elect. On these and other crucial aspects of the doctrine, Augustine and Owen assert the same thing. As Owen notes, “thus far Austin is clearly engaged with us, that perseverance is a gift of God, that it is given by him to everyone that doth persevere, and that every one to whom it is given is inseparably confirmed in grace, and shall infallibly persevere to the end.”<sup>67</sup> The difference rests with how the two theologians tie this doctrine to their overall theologies: Owen sees the saints’ perseverance as grounded in the immutability of the Godhead, while Augustine discusses the doctrine from the perspective of soteriology and grace. Whatever substantial differences may appear between the two, it is unlikely to reside in this fact.

### **3. The Apostasy of “Believers”**

Though their terminology differs, both Augustine and Owen also hold similar views on the nature of apostasy within the visible church community. It was the real danger of apostasy which led Augustine to write *De correptione et gratia* in the first place, and in that treatise he clearly acknowledges that members of the church body—true, pious, faithful members—can indeed fall into sin in such a way as they will be eternally punished. Augustine argues for the validity of rebuking backsliders who have not persevered in godliness, “because they have of their own will been changed from a good to an evil life, and on that account are worthy of rebuke; and if rebuke should be of no avail to them, and they should persevere in their ruined life until death, they are also worthy of divine

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64. *Ibid.*, 120-39; Ferguson, *The Christian Life*, 264.

65. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 216.

66. *De correptione*, 14.

67. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance*, 64. Note that Owen refers to Augustine as “Austin.”

condemnation for ever.”<sup>68</sup> Augustine readily acknowledges that many believers fail to persevere and ultimately are condemned. As explored below, for Augustine, there is no contradiction here with his assertion that *the elect* cannot lapse into condemnation, because he draws a firm distinction between *believers* and the *elect*.

Owen as well recognized that many professed believers eventually give up the faith and die apart from the church and the teachings of the gospel.

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Indeed, this is one of the main reasons he wrote his work on *Apostasy*; though a significant theological thinker, Owen’s interests were deeply pastoral and these guided much of his writings.<sup>69</sup> Goodwin had claimed that Reformed writers did not take apostasy seriously and consequently ignored large sections of Scripture which warn of its possibility. Owen, however, freely acknowledged the danger of apostasy, and offered the following description of what is frequently experienced within the Christian community:

1. It is generally recognized that there is “an inferior, common work of the Holy Spirit” in persons “causing in them a great alteration and change as to light, knowledge, abilities, gifts, affections, life, and conversation, when the persons so wrought upon are not quickened, regenerated, nor made new creatures, nor united to Jesus Christ.”<sup>70</sup>
2. These people upon whom the Spirit has laid his “common work” may assent to the realities of the gospel as true in its kind and not merely a counterfeit profession of their beliefs.
3. In light of the above, these people cannot be termed hypocrites since they are not counterfeit believers, pretending only to be genuine believers. Their faith is not merely for show and absent of all substance, “yet, notwithstanding all this, they are in bondage, and at best seek for a righteousness as it were by the works of the law, and in the issue Christ proves to them of none effect.”<sup>71</sup>
4. Many often have excellent gifts, abilities, qualities, even rendering useful service to the mission of the church—nevertheless, they remain unregenerate persons.
5. Having experienced the conviction of the Holy Spirit, as well as the manifold gifts and blessings he brings to true believers, these persons

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68. *De correptione* , 11.

69. Ferguson, *The Christian Life* , 262; Orme, *The Life of John Owen* .

70. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance* , 640–41.

71. *Ibid.*, 641.

who have yet to be fully united to Christ are capable of sinning against the Holy Spirit, “the unpardonable apostasy from God.”<sup>72</sup>

Owen and Augustine both agree that believers from the Christian community can, and sometimes do, turn away from the faith and are condemned as unfaithful.

The harmony between this assertion and the conviction mentioned above concerning the elects’ certainty of perseverance is found in the distinctions the two authors make between those who receive the gift of perseverance and those who do not. Augustine speaks of the church as those who are *believers*, some of whom receive the gift of perseverance, continue on as Christians to the end, and are ultimately saved, and some of whom do not receive the gift of perseverance and are accounted as part of the reprobate: those who do not persevere “are not made to differ from that lump which it is plain is condemned, as all go from one into condemnation.”<sup>73</sup> Augustine

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is clear that this condemnation is reserved even for those who “having heard the gospel and been changed by it for the better, [yet] have not received perseverance.”<sup>74</sup> Augustine does not deny that those who do not persevere have been touched by God—indeed, his description of these people who ultimately will perish is surprising. He consistently refers to them as “believers” and notes that they were “called” by God; they are described as “those whom He gave love by which they might live Christianly,” “some of His own children—whom He has regenerated in Christ—to whom he has given faith, hope, and love,”<sup>75</sup> and “renewed by the laver of regeneration.”<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, they are actually “children of perdition” and God knows this for he has not elected them.<sup>77</sup>

Augustine elaborates on this notion by distinguishing between those believers who have been called, and those who have been “called according to the purpose,” i.e., the elect. Those given the gift of perseverance “were not so called as not to be elected, in respect of which it is said, ‘for many are called but few are elected;’ but because they were called according to the purpose, they are of a certainty also elected by the election, as it is said, of grace.”<sup>78</sup> In speaking of those who will certainly persevere, Augustine notes:

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72. *Ibid.*, 642.

73. *De correptione*, 12. Cf., Augustine, *De doctrina Christiana*, iii.32, in *NPNF*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 519–97.

74. *De correptione*, 12.

75. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

76. *De perseverantiae*, 21.

77. *De correptione*, 40; 20.

78. *Ibid.*, 13.

they are elected because they were called according to the purpose—the purpose, however, not their own, but God’s... . For whoever are elected are without doubt also called; but not whosoever are called are as a consequence elected. Those, then, are elected, as has often been said, who are called according to the purpose, who also are predestinated and foreknown.<sup>79</sup>

This distinction is important to Augustine, and continues to play an important role in his explanation of both the doctrine of perseverance and the experience of some believers who fall away.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, some people appear elect to our eyes, even receiving much grace in this life. Yet, their ultimate failure to persevere demonstrates that they are not one of the elect. However, that does not mean that they are hypocrites, for their righteousness is not feigned, but real; their righteous and pious living is not faked, but a result of their having been given grace from heaven. In Augustine’s thought, no one is able to live, even temporally, a godly life without grace. Many believers in the church, then, have been given the grace to hear, believe, and obey the Gospel—and are even called

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“regenerate” by Augustine—yet have not been given the grace to persevere to the end.<sup>81</sup>

In this sense, Augustine even seems to indicate that these people who will ultimately not persevere have been predestined to live for a time a Christian life, though they have not received the gift of perseverance to match that gift of initial faith. There is a kind of “double predestination” here (though of course Augustine uses no such term)—first a predestination to an initial life of faith (as described in *De praedestinatione sanctorum*) and an additional predestination to perseverance. The elect receive both the gift of *initium fidei* and *perseverantis fidei*. Some believers only receive *initium fidei*, and are ultimately not distinguished from the reprobate. In Augustine’s terminology, many are called (i.e., predestinated to receive *initium fidei*) to a temporary life of faith, but few are chosen (i.e., predestinated to receive both the gift of initial and persevering grace).<sup>82</sup> Augustine anticipates the natural question: why would God grant initial graces to some and not complete the process with persevering grace? Augustine’s constant refrain in light of these questions is “God’s ways are unsearchable!”<sup>83</sup>

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79. *Ibid.*, 14. Cf., 20; 39.

80. *De praedestinatione*, 7; *De perseverantiae*, 21; 33; *De doctrina Christiana*, iii.32.

81. *De correptione*, 18–22.

82. *De praedestinatione*, 33; *De correptione*, 13–16. Cf., *De perseverantiae*, 21; 33; 54.

83. *De perseverantiae*, 21; *In Joannis Evangelium*, LIII, 6; *De correptione*, 17; *De praedestinatione*, 11; 16; 26.

But of two pious men, why to the one should be given perseverance unto the end, and to the other it should not be given, God's judgments are even more unsearchable... . Were not both created by God—both born of Adam—both made from the earth, and given from Him who said, "I have created all breath," souls of one and the same nature? Lastly, had not both been called, and followed Him that called them? and had not both become, from wicked men, justified men, and both been renewed by the laver of regeneration? But if he were to hear this who beyond all doubt knew what he was saying, he might answer and say: These things are true. In respect of all these things, they were of us. Nevertheless, in respect of a certain other distinction, they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they certainly would have continued with us. What then is this distinction? God's books lie open, let us not turn away our view; the divine Scripture cries aloud, let us give it a hearing. They were not of them, because they had not been "called according to the purpose;" they had not been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world; they had not gained a lot in Him; they had not been predestinated according to His purpose who worketh all things. For if they had been this, they would have been of them, and without doubt they would have continued with them.<sup>84</sup>

Owen also distinguished between two sorts of people who make up the visible church community: real or genuine believers who will certainly persevere to the end, and professed believers who will not persevere. Owen contends that possession of Christ and profession of the faith are not the

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same thing. He recognizes that in the second group, i.e., those who profess Christianity and outwardly appear to be genuine believers, there will be some hypocrites, people who feign their Christian faith.<sup>85</sup> But, for the most part, Owen views these people as sincere in their Christian experiences, honestly professing Christian faith. Nevertheless, those who appear to fall away from the faith have experienced only a temporary holiness, changed in outward appearance and thought, but not renewed in their nature. They have received true evangelical graces from God, graces unique to the Gospel dispensation and the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>86</sup> These gifts from the Holy Spirit are not to be taken lightly, but as evidence of the Spirit's great work in the world. Yet, these "especial gospel privileges" and "evangelical" graces are not the same thing as salvation. The Spirit has blessed certain men in a powerful way, yet not granted them

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84. *De perseverantiae* , 21.

85. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* , 80.

86. Owen, *The Nature of Apostasy* , 17–18; 33–34.

salvation—they remain outside the elect, even while experiencing great benefits of grace. Owen describes such people:

such as, having received sundry common gifts and graces of the Spirit—as illumination of the mind, change of affections, and thence amendment of life, with sorrow of the world, legal repentance, temporary faith, and the like, which are all true and real in their kind,—do thereby become vessels in the great house of God, being changed as to their use, though not in their nature, continuing stone and wood still, though hewed and turned to the serviceableness of vessels; and on that account they are frequently termed saints and believers. On such as these there is a lower (and in some a subordinate) work of the Spirit, effectually producing in and on all the faculties of their souls somewhat that is true, good, and useful in itself, answering in some likeness and suitableness of operation unto the great work of regeneration, which faileth not. There is in them light, love, joy, faith, zeal, obedience, etc., all true in their kinds; which make many of them in whom they are do worthily in their generation : howbeit they attain not to the faith of God’s elect, neither doth Christ live in them, nor is the life which they lead by the faith of the Son of God.<sup>87</sup>

Interestingly, Owen does echo Augustine’s distinction, noting that professed believers who ultimately fail to persevere have proven that they are not “called according to the purpose of God.”<sup>88</sup> It is clear from these descriptions, that Augustine and Owen thought similarly concerning the true nature of those who eventually fail to persevere.

In his denial of the doctrine of the saints’ perseverance, Goodwin had tried to claim Augustine as holding a similar view: “Now the judgment of the fathers more generally, and of Austin more particularly, stood for the possibility of the saints’ defection, both total and final, wherein it seemeth

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the greater part of our modern reformed divines have departed from them.”<sup>89</sup> Owen, however, expresses outrage at the claim and cannot imagine “from what ambiguity of expression it is that any sentence is stolen from Austin and others of the ancients, seeming to countenance the doctrine of the saints’ apostasy,” and feels confident in asserting “that not one of the ancients, much less Austin, did ever maintain such an apostasy of saints and such a perseverance as that which Mr. Goodwin contendeth for.”<sup>90</sup> Owen’s outrage notwithstanding, he does earlier in his preface to the reader note that Augustine’s terminology differs from his, yet

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87. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance*, 90.

88. Owen, *The Nature of Apostasy*, 33.

89. Goodwin, *Redemption Redeemed*, 170.

90. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance*, 497–98.

insists that the church fathers “be allowed the common courtesy of being interpreters of their own meaning.”

What weight in those days was laid upon the participation of the sacramental figures of grace, and what expressions are commonly used concerning them who had obtained that privilege, are known to all. Hence all baptized persons, continuing in the profession of the faith and communion of the church, they called, counted, esteemed truly regenerated and justified, and spake so of them. Such as these they constantly affirmed might fall away into everlasting destruction.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, although Owen calls such people “unregenerate”<sup>92</sup> and Augustine refers to them as “regenerate,” Owen believes they have the same group in mind and differ only in terminology built on their differing understanding of the church sacraments. Goodwin’s claim to Augustine is built upon an equivocal use of terminology and not on any substantive link between their positions. Rather, as Owen notes, those who fail to persevere are actually in the same category as Owen himself describes:

These are the persons which Austin and those of the same judgment with him do grant that they may fall away, such as, upon the account of their baptismal entrance into the church, their pious, devout lives, their profession of the faith of the gospel, they called and accounted regenerate believers; of whom yet they tell you, upon a thorough search into the nature and causes of holiness, grace, and walking with God, that they would be found not to be truly and really in that state and condition that they were esteemed to be in.<sup>93</sup>

#### **4. The Purpose of Apostates within the Church**

Augustine and Owen did differ significantly in what they perceived the purposes of God to be in allowing a mingling in the church of some who would not persevere and some who would. Augustine clearly thought that it was in the best interests of holiness that God allowed both those elect with

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perseverance and those without to be together in one church. He seems to have two purposes in mind: first, that every believer would fear the danger of apostasy and strive against falling into it, and second, that pride would not develop within God’s people:

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91. *Ibid.*, 65-66.

92. *Ibid.*, chapter XV.

93. *Ibid.*, 66. Cf., *De correptione*, 18.

Those who will not persevere are, by the most foreseeing will of God, mingled with those who will persevere, for the reason that we may learn not to mind high things, but to consent to the lowly, and may ‘work out our own salvation with fear and trembling’ for it is ‘God that worketh in us both to will and to do for His good pleasure.’<sup>94</sup>

That such things as these [scriptural warnings about apostasy] are so spoken to saints who will persevere, as if it were reckoned uncertain whether they will persevere, is a reason that they ought not otherwise to hear these things, since it is well for them ‘not to be high-minded, but to fear.’<sup>95</sup>

God has judged it to be better to mingle some who would not persevere with a certain number of His saints, so that those for whom security from temptation in this life is not desirable may not be secure. For that which the apostle says, checks many from mischievous elation: ‘Wherefore let him who seems to stand take heed lest he fall.’ But he who falls, falls by his own will, and he who stands, stands by God’s will. ‘For God is able to make him stand;’ therefore he is not able to make himself stand, but God. Nevertheless, it is good not to be high-minded, but to fear.<sup>96</sup>

These citations reveal Augustine’s concern that the doctrine of perseverance not be taken as an excuse for immoral living, nor for the furthering of pride in one’s life. Thus, the presence and “fall from grace” of certain people in the community of faith is seen as a testimony against such unholy attitudes.

In Puritan England, Goodwin had objected to the doctrine of perseverance largely on the grounds that it produced such a moral laxity and engendered the kind of pride that Augustine warned against.<sup>97</sup> Owen, however, rejected such arguments. As Sinclair Ferguson notes, “rather than encourage loose living, the assurance of perseverance promotes truth and holiness in the Christian life.”<sup>98</sup> The presence of apostates within the professing body of Christ, whatever their true nature, tests every believer in order to establish them in a greater maturity of faith. Whatever the reason, the presence of those who fall away from the faith does not, in Owen’s view, shake in the least the faith of those truly called by God: “that no sound persons may be shaken, because unhealthy ones are shattered,—that those may not tremble who are built on the rock, because those are

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94. *De perseverantiae* , 33.

95. *De correptione* , 40.

96. *De perseverantiae* , 19. See also, 39; 62.

97. Goodwin, *Redemption Redeemed* , chapter XI.

98. Ferguson, *The Christian Life* , 263. Cf., Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance* , chapter X.

cast down who are built on the sand,—is one part of my aim and intentment in handling this doctrine.” Apostasy, while shocking, “yet is it exceedingly remote from being any true ground of shaking the faith of those who truly believe.”<sup>99</sup> Fear cannot be a reason for the presence of those who will fall away:

It is denied that the fall of the most glorious hypocrites is indeed an efficacious engine in the hands of the adversary to ingenerate any other fears and jealousies, or to expose them to any other shakings, than what are common to them in other temptations of daily incursion, from which God doth constantly make a way for them to escape, 1 Cor. x.13.<sup>100</sup>

### 5. The Subjective Effect of the Doctrine on Believers

The different understanding on the presence in the church of those who do not receive the gift of perseverance highlights perhaps the largest difference between Augustine and Owen, the subjective influence of the doctrine on believers. As most studies on perseverance note, Augustine developed his doctrine with the explicit intention not to give a sense of certainty and assurance to the believer.<sup>101</sup> The exact manner in which Augustine separated the two is not nearly as obvious as the fact that he did actually do so.

While teaching the undeniably gratuitous character of perseverance, Augustine insisted that a believer could not tell if he had the gift of perseverance or not. This was part of Augustine’s reasoning for advocating the necessity of pastoral admonitions in *De correptione et gratia*—since a Christian leader cannot tell if one’s failures are due to a temporary or final apostasy, he is duty bound to rebuke all who fall away.<sup>102</sup> In *De civitate Dei*, Augustine states that the only way one can know for sure during this lifetime if they are part of the elect, is through special revelation: “For what man can know that he will persevere to the end in the exercise and increase of grace, unless he has been certified by some revelation from Him who, in His just and secret judgment, while He deceives none, informs few regarding this matter?”<sup>103</sup> Otherwise, “Let not men say, then, that perseverance is given to any one to the end, except when the end itself has come, and he to whom it has been given has been found to have persevered unto the end.”<sup>104</sup> Any presumption as to

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99. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance*, 80.

100. *Ibid.*, 81.

101. Advocates for a subjective assurance have cited Augustine as follows: “To be assured of our salvation is no arrogant stoutness; it is our faith. It is no pride; it is devotion. It is no presumption; it is God’s promise,” Ryle, *Holiness*, 216; Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 12. However, I have been unable to track down this citation, and am suspicious of its validity. The original quotation was made by Bishop Jewel.

102. *De correptione*, 25.

103. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, xi.12, in *NPNF*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 1–511.

one's elect status, Augustine fears, "may engender pride."<sup>105</sup> It is only in heaven, where the temptation of pride is not present, that one's elect status can be known with certainty. Thus, he gives this command:

Holding this hope, serve the Lord in fear, and rejoice unto Him with trembling. Because no one can be certain of the life eternal which God who does not lie has promised to the children of promise before the times of eternity,—no one, unless that life of his, which is a state of trial upon the earth, is completed.<sup>106</sup>

This, of course, is a very different position than that taken by Owen. As noted above, one of Owen's main goals in attacking Goodwin's "perseverance by human merit" doctrine was so that "all the saints of God may yet enjoy that peace and consolation,"<sup>107</sup> i.e., a subjective assurance of salvation. For Owen, the tie between the objective character of perseverance and the subjective effect of assurance in the believer is undeniable. Despite never writing a full-length treatise on assurance, Owen faithfully expounds the doctrine fully in *A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX*, and in at least a half dozen other works he significantly addresses the issue.<sup>108</sup> Although Owen was sensitive to believers who lacked the certainty of their faith, he was strongly convinced that assurance was part and parcel of Christian faith. As part of his argument for the doctrine of perseverance, Owen asserts that many within the family of God experience the blessing of assurance:

I no way doubt but many thousands of believers, whose apprehensions of the nature, properties, and conditions of things, as they are in themselves, are low, weak, and confused, yet, having received the Spirit of adoption, bearing witness with their spirits that they are the children of God, and having the testimony in themselves, have been taken up into as high a degree of comforting and cheering assurances, and that upon the most infallible foundation imaginable, as ever the most seraphically illuminated person in the world attained unto.<sup>109</sup>

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104. *De perseverantiae* , 10.

105. *De correptione* , 40.

106. *De perseverantiae* , 62.

107. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* , 5–6.

108. For example, see Owen, *A Practical Exposition Upon Psalm CXXX ; Two Short Catechisms ; Communion with God* . See also, Beeke, *Assurance of Faith* , 213–80.

109. Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance* , 83.

Whereas Augustine wrote about perseverance in order to elevate the gracious character of God's grace, Owen intentionally has in mind the subjective, experiential aspect of the doctrine. More than anything else, it is this difference which distinguishes Augustine and Owen, and which contributed to much of the confusion surrounding Augustine's doctrine.

## VI. Conclusion

Although the historical setting for Augustine's discussion of perseverance differed from that of Owen's, there is a significant continuity in thought between the two theologians. While the focus of their writings leads to an

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emphasis on different nuances, their positions overlapped significantly on major issues. Augustine argued pervasively for the understanding of perseverance as a gift from God and separated from human merit. While Owen instead concentrated his writings on the infallible efficacy of perseverance, he readily acknowledged the gratuitous character of perseverance and in large part assumes that character in his argumentation. Both authors insist on defending God's actions in persevering the elect to the end—Augustine promotes the completely gratuitous nature of God's grace, and Owen ties perseverance to God's immutable promises. While the difference on this level affects the approach taken by the authors, it does not significantly impact their specific formulation of doctrine.

Both theologians also agree that some members of the visible church community have not in fact been given the gift of persevering faith. Augustine considers these to have been predestined or called to a life of faith for a temporary time, with a real, genuine godliness, yet such that it will not persevere to the end. Owen similarly recognizes a powerful, special work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, bringing about significant changes and godliness, yet a work of the Spirit which stops short of true, genuine saving faith. The difference one encounters between Augustine and Owen on this level is largely a matter of semantics and/or a function of Augustine's sacramental/ecclesiastical views. On issues of soteriology and salvation, their understanding of perseverance is very similar.

What is different between the two is their respective views on the subjective impact of the doctrine of perseverance. Augustine's concern for holiness and his worries about the evils of pride led him to deny any possibility (apart from special revelation) of a believer having sustained assurance of his salvation and inclusion in the elect. Owen, on the other hand, tied the objective God-centered perseverance to a subjective, believer-oriented assurance of salvation. Because the Christian can trust in God's perseverance, he can have certainty of his eventual attainment of the kingdom of heaven. This difference also colored their respective understandings of why God allows those who will not persevere to mingle with those who will. Augustine held that God used these examples to inspire holiness, fear, and humility. Owen, alternatively, denied that fear of apostasy should undercut a believer's assurance, and that the presence of apostates tested genuine believers causing them to mature in their faith.

Despite these differences, however, John Owen's presentation of the doctrine of perseverance in his dispute with the semi-pelagian John Goodwin closely

parallels Augustine's own formulation in light of his controversy with semi-pelagian opponents twelve hundred years earlier.

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