

Chapter 5: To Continue in This Doctrine

Persevere

The first question asked when you make profession of faith actually consists of two points. After you are asked if you wholeheartedly believe the doctrine taught in the local Christian church, another question follows: "Do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this doctrine in life and death, rejecting all heresies and errors conflicting with God's Word?"

Here we are asked if we will steadfastly continue in this true and complete doctrine of salvation, if we will endure in this doctrine.

We come across this word "endure" repeatedly in the Bible. In his prophetic (Olivet) discourse the Saviour says: "But the one who endures to the end will be saved." (Matthew 24:13) The Lord Christ refers to the great crisis his disciples will experience. Soon the destruction of the temple and the temple city Jerusalem will take place. They will have to live through it; then it will be a matter of persevering in the fight, just as a soldier does not give up, but fights till the end. So this endurance is an *active* matter.

It is not just passively *undergoing* their fate. No, it is consciously *facing* the crisis that is taking place, and then not giving up, but fighting to the bitter end. He who overcomes this crisis in faith will not perish, but will be saved. He will find life, and victory.

A second example is found in the letter of the apostle Paul to the Romans. Paul writes there about the fruits of justification. When we are justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Then we rejoice, says the apostle, in the hope of the glory of God. "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance" (Romans 5:3). The troubles, persecutions and tribulations that believers must suffer on earth have a certain effect on these believers; it toughens them. It gives them perseverance and endurance, the way iron and steel become stronger and can withstand battering and hammering. So it is with tribulation. It produces endurance in God's children. This perseverance consciously suffers tribulation with a view to promised glory.

We can read a third example in the letter of James. He says in the beginning of his letter:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces

steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

James teaches that Satan's trial brings the reality of faith to the surface. He speaks of it as an interaction: trials bring out faith, and that faith works endurance, which in turn enables one to bear the trials. True faith endures: he who lives in that faith will not be cast down. This perseverance in its turn fulfills its tasks to the end. It continues and works to the end. Then persevering believers will reach their ultimate goal. They will lack nothing.

That example is clear: faith must continue, through all crises, to reach the final goal. *That* is perseverance.

Asking too much?

The question arises: Is that not too much to ask? It is very easy to say: I will continue to the end, I will continue in this doctrine, as long as everything is fine. That is easily said when there isn't a cloud in the sky, and when not a single storm of tribulation or trial menaces you.

But isn't it much, much harder, to persevere when you are in the midst of trouble, and you no longer know which way to turn? And is it fair, then, to ask in advance: do you promise to *continue* in this faith and to endure forever? Is that the right thing to ask?

First of all, we should note carefully that *five* little words of utmost importance are added to the question, namely: "By the grace of God"! That means: when you make profession, you don't say that you will manage and persevere just fine. No, you promise: "I will continue in this doctrine steadfastly by the grace of God." You're not saying "I am strong!", but you are saying: "The LORD is faithful!" The apostle Peter writes in his first letter that there is a double protection promise for us. The inheritance is reserved for us in heaven. And at the same time: we are "protected by the power of God through faith for... salvation" (1 Peter 1:4,5, NASB). Whoever speaks of "continuing in the doctrine", of "persevering to the end" speaks of God's protection. By his grace we steadfastly continue.

Perseverance of the saints

The Canons of Dort speak about the perseverance of the saints as well. With regard to sin and the temptation of the world and of Satan, we may confess that "those who have been converted could not remain standing in that grace if left to their own strength. But God is faithful, who mercifully confirms

them in the grace once conferred upon them and powerfully preserves them in that grace to the end." (Canons of Dort, V, Article 3)

When you read the remainder of this chapter about the perseverance of the saints, you will see that in no way it says simplistically: "once believed, always believed." No, this creed shows us how difficult it is to continue in the faith and to persevere in the doctrine. How weak we are of ourselves! How great is the power of sin! How sly Satan is! How can we persevere? Can we muster the courage needed if we meet up with persecution?

Can you now say: "I will likely persevere when the time comes that we will be robbed of our freedom?" No, perseverance of the saints means: the LORD in his grace will grant me perseverance in my time of need. I must pray for his grace for the present. I must be faithful in the task he gives me *now*.

The LORD will *make* me faithful in the task he gives me through his Holy Spirit. He will also do this when things become difficult, in situations which I cannot yet foresee.

The way of the means

This means that we must also walk the way of the means. The Lord does not test you beyond your strength, say the Scriptures.

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

The LORD does not ask impossible things of us. He does not require divine work from us. He does ask that we go about our task in a human manner, and that we make use of the *means*. Especially in connection with the perseverance of the saints our last creed is very clear about those means: "Just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so he maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of his Word, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and by the use of the sacraments." (Canons of Dort, V, Article 14) That means: are you sure that you will continue in this faith?

Then you must attend church services regularly, each time you are called, twice each Sunday. You must listen to the sermon. You must read the Bible for yourself. You must search the Scriptures, individually and with others. You must use your baptism, you must attend the Lord's Supper faithfully.

Those are the means which the LORD God wants you to use in order to persevere!

"By the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this doctrine". This is not only a *demand*, it is also a *promise*. Whatever God the LORD demands of his children, he also gives. That is why this doctrine of perseverance gives us so much comfort. The Canons of Dort end so beautifully. This creed concludes almost as a song of praise:

This doctrine of the perseverance of true believers and saints, and of their assurance of it, God has most abundantly revealed in his Word for the glory of his Name and for the consolation of the godly, and he impresses it on the hearts of believers. It is something which the flesh does not understand, Satan hates, the world ridicules, the ignorant and the hypocrites abuse, and the heretics attack. The Bride of Christ, on the other hand, has always loved this doctrine most tenderly and defended it steadfastly as a treasure of inestimable value; and God, against whom no counsel can avail and no strength can prevail, shall see to it that she will continue to do so. To this God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honour and glory forever. Amen. (Canons of Dort, V, Article 15)

K. Deddens