



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 201

Believers may stray and fall into serious sins – Though the doctrine of perseverance affirms that true believers are those who will certainly persevere to the end, it does not teach that they will never fall into sin, even serious sin. The Bible clearly teaches that believers do sin, do backslide from the faith, and even can and do fall into grievous sins. We can look at the lives of David and Peter as classic examples of this (2 Samuel 11:1-4; 12:9; Matthew 26:56; 69-75). The Westminster Confession of Faith states that believers may fall into grievous sins “through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of the corruption remaining in them” (Chapter 17, Section 3). When believers become complacent or neglectful regarding the proper use of the means of grace, they become easy prey for their enemies.

The Confession states that when we sin and persist in it we incur God’s displeasure, that is, come under His anger. This is not God’s punitive wrath against unbelievers, but His corrective wrath reserved for His children who fall into sin, aimed to lead them to holiness (Job 5:17-18; Proverbs 3:11-12; Isaiah 54:8; Hebrews 12:5-11). Also the Confession states that when we sin we grieve the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). Our sin cannot not influence or provoke God to have mood swings – to get angry or disappointed; rather, with our persistent sinning we turn ourselves away from God’s blessings, empowering, and assurance; as the Confession states, “[believers] come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded.” David knew this condition well (Psalm 51:8, 10-12). In the Bible the hardness of the heart is not just a description of unbelievers, but is also spoken of believers, who stray from God and His truth (Mark 6:52; 16:14).

For a believer this is a very harmful and dangerous condition to be in. The believer’s conscience becomes guilt stricken, judging him for his sins; and the more he continues in the path of unrighteousness, the more his conscience will be impaired, and his heart will become further obstinate against God (Psalm 81:10-12; Psalm 32:3-4; 38:1-4; Proverbs 28:14; 1 Timothy 1:18-19). In this state, the Confession states that believers “hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.” It isn’t just the believer who is impacted by his sins, but they also hurt and damage his family, friends, other believers, the church of Christ, and worst of all bring shame and dishonor to the name of the Lord (2 Samuel 12:10, 14).

But praise God that this is not the end of the story for believers. The Confession states that this will be the state of believers “for a time.” Believers can fall, and fall badly, but their fall will be partial and temporary, and not total and final (WCF 17.1). God’s grace and discipline will accomplish its purpose of leading the believer to genuine remorse, confession, and repentance (Psalm 94:12-14; Proverbs 24:16; 2 Corinthians 7:9-11). This is what happened to David (2 Samuel 12:13; Psalm 32; 38; 51).

What was the difference between Judas’ and Peter’s betrayal of Christ? Though Judas had professed to be a believer, he was never a believer (Matthew 26:24; John 17:12). Judas’ remorse was a worldly repentance which led to his suicide (Matthew 27:3-5). On the other hand, Peter’s remorse was genuine, a godly repentance, one wrought by the Holy Spirit, for the Lord told him that He had prayed for him, asking the Father to preserve his faith (Luke 22:31-32; John 17:9-12). This was a great promise which the Lord gave Peter, and one which He gives to all of us, His people. Christ is continuously interceding for us, asking the Father to give us all that we need to persevere in the faith (Romans 8:34-39).

As true believers we may fall into many sins, may at times have difficulty trusting and hoping in God, and may even fall into serious and grievous sins, nevertheless our faith will not permanently be overcome by doubt, and we will not totally or finally fall away from the state of grace, but will certainly persevere to the end, for “[Christ] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).