

ON THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

# Held, Not Holding

*Perseverance, the Means of Grace, and the Ground of Assurance*

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Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*

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*“...the one who began a good work in you will perfect it...” (Philippians 1:6, NET)*

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Every so often a question arrives that is not really a puzzle to be solved but a nerve to be found. A Lutheran seminarian recently posted one. He had studied the doctrine of election in Article XI of the Solid Declaration and agreed with all of it. His trouble was with what the article does not directly systematize: falling away. He was not asking abstractly. Five friends in the space of a month had stopped following Christ. So the question had teeth.

He laid out what looked like a trap. The Calvinist has a tidy answer: those who fall were never truly converted—the “P” of TULIP, perseverance guaranteed by decree. We reject that “P,” because Scripture and the Confessions both teach that a genuine believer can genuinely fall away. But rejecting it seems to open a hole. If we say instead that God preserves us *through* the means of grace—that He keeps us by the Word and the Sacraments—then haven’t we made our own use of those means a condition of staying saved? And isn’t a condition we fulfill just synergism wearing a nicer coat? So the dilemma: either God does all the preserving and no one can fall (Calvinism), or we have to “feed our faith” and assurance evaporates.

It is a good dilemma. It is also a false one. And it comes apart at exactly one seam.

## Two commitments that will not be surrendered

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Lutheran theology holds two things at once here, and the temptation of every rival system is to relieve the tension by dropping one of them.

The first is **monergism**. Conversion is God’s work from first to last; the will contributes nothing to its own regeneration (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration II). We were dead, and the dead do not assist in their own resurrection. What is true of conversion is true of preservation: the same grace that raised us keeps us. He is the one “who is able to protect you from stumbling” (Jude 24, NET)—we are held from falling by His power, not our own vigilance.

The second is the **real possibility of apostasy**. A true believer can lose true faith. This is not a hypothetical hedge; the Scriptures press it as a live danger to actual Christians. Paul tells “the one who thinks he is standing” to take heed, because he may yet fall (1 Corinthians 10:12). Others have rejected a good conscience and made shipwreck of their faith (1 Timothy 1:19). In the parable of the sower, the seed on rock represents those who “believe for a while, but in a time of testing fall away” (Luke 8:13, NET)—they believe, then fall. The

Lutheran does not say their faith was a counterfeit all along. It was real, and it was lost. That is precisely why the warning is a warning and not a riddle.

Calvinism secures the first commitment by sacrificing the second: it grounds perseverance so deeply in the eternal decree that final falling becomes impossible, and any apparent believer who falls is reclassified as never having believed. Synergism and later Arminianism secure the second by softening the first: preservation becomes cooperative, contingent on a decision I keep making, and the credit for standing gets quietly split. The Confessions refuse both trades. They keep monergism *and* the genuine danger of falling. The seminarian felt that refusal as a “gap.” It is not a gap. It is a discipline.

## The seam: mediated is not synergistic

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The whole apparent contradiction rests on a single conflation—treating *mediated* preservation as if it were *synergistic* preservation. Untangle those two words and the trap springs open on empty air.

Synergism is the claim that the human will contributes something to the work of salvation—that grace and the sinner cooperate as two agents, each supplying a part. That the Confessions reject flatly.

Mediation is a different question entirely. It does not ask *who acts*; it asks *by what instrument God acts*. And the Lutheran answer is that God has bound His preserving grace to appointed instruments: the preached and read Word, Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, the Lord’s Supper. These are the “ordinary means” through which the Spirit is given and sustained. They are not a second contributor standing alongside God. They are the delivery of the one Giver’s one gift.

Here everything turns on the old dogmatic description of faith as the *organon leptikon*—the *receptive* organ. Faith does not *do* in the reception of grace; it *receives*. It is the empty hand held out to be filled, the beggar’s open palm, the mouth that eats the bread it did not bake. And receiving a gift is not a contribution to the gift. When I am kept through the Supper, I am not co-preserving myself; I am being preserved, and my only “activity” is the receptivity of faith, which is itself the Spirit’s work in me. So grace runs *through* the means without any of it running *through me as an agent*. It is monergism the whole way down. The means are simply the place where the monergism meets a body in a pew on a Sunday morning.

This is why “God preserves us through Word and Sacrament” is not a hair’s breadth from Rome or Geneva-in-reverse. It is not “God does His part and I do mine.” It is “God does the whole of it, and here is where He hands it over.” Neglecting the means, then, is not the

failure to perform my half of a joint venture. It is the act of shoving away the very Spirit who was holding me. Which brings us to the asymmetry that is the hinge of the entire doctrine.

## The asymmetry: *sola gratia, sola culpa*

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Read the fall-away texts closely and you find they never split the credit and the blame down the middle. They are relentlessly non-parallel. Everything good is laid at God's feet; everything ruinous is laid at man's.

If you stand, God gets all the glory: He began the good work and will perfect what He started (Philippians 1:6); "no one can snatch them from my Father's hand" (John 10:29, NET). If you fall, the fault is entirely and only yours: you resisted the Spirit, despised the Word, grew hard, drove Him out. Salvation is God's work alone. Damnation is man's alone. There is no symmetry here, and Lutheranism has made peace with that where every rival system reaches for the scissors.

The Calvinist restores symmetry by making both salvation and reprobation flow from a single divine decree—double predestination—so that the lost are lost because God eternally passed them by. The synergist restores symmetry from the other side, letting the decisive difference between the saved and the lost lie in the man: one cooperated, one did not. Both are more rationally satisfying than what the Formula does. And both purchase that satisfaction at the price of Scripture. Solid Declaration XI will not let election become a decree of reprobation; God's antecedent will is that all people be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), and the cause of any soul's destruction is its own contempt for the Word, never a divine sentence written before the foundations were laid. Solid Declaration II will not let the will become a co-worker in its own rescue. So the Confessions hold the non-parallel line: *grace alone* for the saved, *fault alone* for the lost, and no tidy mechanism spanning the two.

## The *crux theologorum*

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Push on that asymmetry and you reach the oldest hard question in the tradition, the one the old dogmatists named the *crux theologorum*—the cross the theologians hang on. If grace is truly for all, and all are equally guilty, and no man contributes anything to his own conversion, then *why are some saved and not others?* Two men hear the same sermon. One believes and is kept; one hardens and is lost. What made the difference?

Every answer that satisfies the mind betrays the text. Say the difference lies in God—He chose to give one man more grace, or decreed the other's reprobation—and you have

double predestination, and you have made God the author of the very ruin He weeps over. Say the difference lies in the man—he was more receptive, less resistant, made the better call—and you have synergism, and you have handed the man a splinter of the glory that belongs to grace. The Lutheran, staring at this cross, does something that feels almost like a refusal to do theology: he declines to complete the sentence. He confesses *sola gratia* for the saved and *sola culpa* for the lost, and where the bridge between them ought to be, he leaves an honest silence and a pointing finger. The finger points to Christ.

This is what the seminarian read as a hole in Article XI. But XI is not being evasive; it is being obedient. It expressly forbids us to seek our election in the hidden counsel of God, and commands us to seek it only where God has revealed Himself—in Christ, offered to us through the call, the Word, and the Sacraments. The article is not *missing* the answer to the *crux*. It is *withholding* it on purpose, because the only place the answer could be found is the secret will of God, and that is precisely the door the Formula nails shut. What XI hands us instead is better than an answer. It hands us Christ, and an address where He can reliably be found.

## Assurance that lives outside you

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Which finally reaches the real question, the one under all the others: *how do I know my faith will make it to the end?* And here the pastoral payoff of being Lutheran rather than Reformed is not subtle. It is the difference between looking in a mirror and looking at a font.

If preservation is anchored in a hidden decree, then the burning question of assurance becomes: *am I one of the decreed?* And there is no way to read that decree directly. So the Reformed tradition, at its most consistent, is pressed toward the *practical syllogism*: Christ saves the elect; the elect show the marks and fruits of election; I examine myself for those marks; therefore I conclude I am probably among them. It is an honest attempt, and it can produce real comfort. But notice where it sends a frightened Christian for relief—inward, to inspect the quality of his own repentance and the sincerity of his own faith. And the mirror is the cruelest possible place to seek assurance, because on the nights you most need it, the reflection is always ambiguous. The stronger your conscience, the more the marks look counterfeit.

Lutheran assurance runs in the opposite direction. It is grounded *extra nos*—outside you. Not in the temperature of your devotion, not in the visible fruit, not in a verdict you extract from introspection, but in the objective, external, deliverable Word: in your Baptism, which happened *to* you and does not depend on your feelings about it; in the Absolution, spoken by a man in Christ's stead and by His command; in the body and blood given and shed *for you—pro te*, the two little words that turn a general fact into a personal

promise. Luther's counsel to the terrified was never "search yourself for evidence of election." It was *Baptizatus sum*—**I am baptized**. That is not sentiment. It is a fact with a date, an address, and a promise attached, and it stands whether or not I feel it standing.

The old theologians distinguished two things our language now blurs. *Securitas* is carnal security—the presumption of a man who no longer trembles, who takes grace for granted and drifts from the means because he assumes he is safe. *Certitudo* is evangelical certainty—the confidence of a man who has stopped trusting his own grip and now rests entirely on the One holding him. The Confessions labor to give us the second while refusing us the first. And the whole architecture is designed to keep assurance from ever becoming a report on *my* faithfulness. Your assurance is not the strength of your hold on Christ. It is the certainty of His hold on you. You are **held, not holding**. And what is held can be weak, exhausted, half-asleep, and still be held.

## The warnings are a mercy

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If that is so, what are the fall-away texts *for*? Why does Scripture keep the danger in front of believers at all, if the aim is confidence?

Because the warning is not a threat aimed at your peace; it is a fence aimed at the cliff. The threat of apostasy exists to do one specific pastoral thing—to keep you from *securitas*, from the drift into presumption, and to drive you *back to the means*, not away from them. It functions as Law, and Law in the hand of the Spirit always has the same destination: it empties you of self-confidence and deposits you, again, at the font and the rail. A Christian who reads "take heed lest you fall" and responds by clinging harder to his own vigilance has heard it exactly backwards. The right response to the warning is not to grip tighter. It is to go where the grip is: to hear the Word again, to remember his Baptism again, to eat and drink again. The warning is God's way of steering the ship back into the harbor where He does the keeping.

So the two things the seminarian could not reconcile turn out to reinforce each other. The reality of falling is what sends me to the means; the means are where God does the preserving I cannot do; and the preserving is entirely His, so the assurance is entirely secure. The danger and the comfort are not at war. The danger is a servant of the comfort.

## For the ones who have left

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Which leaves the five friends—and everyone reading who has their own list of names.

This doctrine refuses two false comforts about them, and offers one true one. It refuses to tell you they were never really believers; the Lutheran does not protect his own peace by rewriting their past. And it refuses to tell you their leaving was decreed and therefore closed; there is no ledger in heaven marking them permanently reprobate. What it offers instead is the same thing it offered you: an address. The door your friend walked out of is the identical door the Spirit still works through. God has not stopped giving faith through the preached Word and the Sacraments; He did not exhaust His mercy at the threshold your friend crossed going out. The means that kept you are the means that could keep them, if they are brought back within earshot of the Word.

So the work is not to pronounce a verdict on a soul you cannot see into. It is humbler and more hopeful than that: to keep the people you love near the ordinary means, and to keep yourself there too. That is where He promises to be. Not in the mirror. At the font, in the Word, at the table—where grace is not something you achieve but something you are handed, again and again, until the day it is finished.

You are held. Stay where the hands are.