

# Lest Anyone Should Fall A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Perseverance and Apostolic Warnings

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## SUMMARY

Apostolic warnings against apostasy pose a difficulty for the classic doctrine of perseverance of the saints because either the warnings seem superfluous or else it seems possible for the believer to fall away after all. The attempt to construe the warnings as the means by which God effects perseverance fails to distinguish the classical doctrine from a Molinist doctrine, according to which believers can fall away but in fact will not due to God's extrinsically efficacious grace. A Molinist perspective is coherent and, unlike the classical doctrine, does not render superfluous the apostolic admonitions.

## LEST ANYONE SHOULD FALL A MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE PERSPECTIVE ON PERSEVERANCE AND APOSTOLIC WARNINGS

Adherents of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints typically maintain that, once a person is truly regenerate, not merely will he not fall away, but that he literally cannot fall away from grace and be lost. Usually this conclusion is thought to follow from the irresistible character and intrinsic efficacy of God's grace: a person who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit is so overwhelmed by God's love, power, and majesty that he is simply rendered incapable of committing apostasy. Therefore, all who through God's sovereign working have come to a knowledge of God will persevere to the end and be saved.

This doctrine sits uncomfortably, however, with numerous passages in Scripture which warn the faithful of the danger of apostasy and describe the terrible desserts of those who deliberately fall from grace (e.g., Rom. 11.17-24; I Cor. 9.27; Gal. 5.4; Col. 1.23; I Thess. 3.5; I Tim. 1.19-20; II Tim. 2.17-18; Jas. 5.19-20; II Pet. 2.20-22; I Jn. 5.16). The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, whose readers were tempted to revert to Judaism under the pressure of persecution, is especially explicit, warning and exhorting his readers against the danger of apostasy (6.1-8; 10.26-31), "lest anyone should fall" through disobedience (4.11).

Although some adherents of the doctrine of perseverance have attempted to explain away such passages by maintaining that they concern persons who were never truly regenerate in the first

place, [1] such a contention seems highly dubious in view of the language of these admonitions, which seem clearly to be directed toward regenerate believers. [2] In light of this fact, defenders of perseverance who take these passages as serious warnings directed toward Christians have offered another explanation of the compatibility of the doctrine of perseverance and warnings against apostasy: the warnings themselves are the *means* by which God preserves the elect. [3] Berkhof, for example, remarks,

There are warnings against apostasy which would seem to be quite uncalled for, if the believer could not fall away . . . . But these warnings regard the whole matter from the side of man and are seriously meant. They prompt self-examination, and are instrumental in keeping believers in the way of perseverance. They do not prove that any of the addressed will apostasize, but simply that the use of means is necessary to prevent them from committing this sin. [4]

By warning believers against apostasy, God ensures that they do not commit apostasy.

This ingenious response raises all sorts of intriguing questions. For example, if the believer's will is so overwhelmed by God's grace that he is actually incapable of apostasizing, then why give such warnings at all? Would they not be entirely superfluous? If, on the other hand, it is the warnings themselves that bring about perseverance, then is it not true that the believer is *capable* of falling away, even though, because of the warnings, he *will* not? For warnings do not seem to act as efficient causes upon the will, forcing one to act in a certain way; they can be disobeyed. Contrast, for example, my speaking English as a result of being raised by English-speaking parents: I am determined to speak English; I cannot suddenly choose to start speaking Vietnamese. I have no freedom simply to elect what language I speak. Now in the case of warnings, if they are severe enough and I am prudent, then I shall certainly heed them. But in virtue of being warned, I do not think we should want to say that my freedom has thereby been removed; it is still within my power to disregard the warnings, and if I am foolish enough, perhaps I shall do so. If then it is merely the warnings that guarantee perseverance, it seems that the believer is in fact free to disobey them and fall away, even though he will not. I shall assume, therefore, that warnings do not obviate human freedom.

What seems to be at stake in the question I am raising is a counterfactual proposition like

1. If the warnings had not been given, the believers would have fallen away.

Does the defender of perseverance regard (1) as true or not? If he holds that (1) is true, then it seems clear that the believers are in fact capable of falling away, for in the closest possible worlds in which the antecedent of (1) is true, they do fall away.

Now the defender of perseverance might insist that even if (1) is true, nevertheless, *given the fact that believers have, indeed, been warned*, the believers cannot fall away. But this response commits an error which is prevalent in discussions of divine foreknowledge and human freedom, namely, confusing the necessity of a proposition *in sensu composito* with its necessity *in sensu diviso*. Proponents of theological fatalism often fail to distinguish these two senses in considering a proposition like

2. Whatever is foreknown by God must occur, which they take to entail a denial of human freedom.

But (2) *in sensu composito* means merely

2\*. Necessarily, any event which is foreknown by God will occur.

In this case, what is necessary is not the occurrence of any event *per se*, but the composite state of affairs consisting of both God's foreknowledge of the event and the event's occurrence. The whole conjunction is necessary, but not the individual conjuncts. Hence, this necessity *in sensu composito* is in no way inimical to human freedom. On the other hand, (2) *in sensu diviso* means

2\*\*. Necessarily, any event, which is foreknown by God, will occur.

This does entail a denial of human freedom, since what is necessary is any event itself. In this case, we do not have a mere composite necessity, but one of the conjuncts is itself asserted to be necessary. The opponent of theological fatalism will claim that (2) when understood *in sensu diviso*, that is, as (2\*\*), is false, but when understood *in sensu composito*, that is, as (2\*), is true and that therefore theological fatalism fails.

Similarly, in the case of perseverance, if (1) is true, then the proposition

3. Any believer who has been warned by God cannot fall away

is at best true *in sensu composito*, that is to say, it is true that

3\*. Necessarily, a believer who has been warned by God will not fall away.

But according to (3\*) it is not impossible that the believer fall away; what is impossible is the conjunction of God's warning him and his falling away. The necessity asserted by (3\*) is ascribed only to the composite state of affairs consisting of God's warning a believer and that believer's remaining faithful. But this composite necessity in no way removes the believer's freedom or ability to fall away. On the other hand, (3) is false *in sensu diviso*, that is to say, it is false that

3\*\*. Necessarily, a believer, who has been warned by God, will not fall away.

For if (1) is true, then even though it is impossible for the believer both to be warned and fall away, it is possible for him to fall away. Therefore, if (1) is true, then the doctrine of perseverance as classically understood is false: the believer *can* fall away, but, necessarily, if he has been warned by God, he *will* not.

But then suppose that the defender of perseverance says that (1) is false, that is, that the opposite of (1) is true. [5] In that case, the warnings would seem to be superfluous. For if God's grace is intrinsically efficacious so that the believer cannot fall away, then it is causally impossible for the believer to apostasize. God causes him to persevere in grace. Seen in this light, the doctrine of perseverance is something of a misnomer; for it is not really *perseverance*, but *preservation* that is at issue here. The crucial point is that God preserves the believer in the state of grace by causally acting upon him, and, therefore, it is causally impossible for him to fall away, and so he perseveres. But if his falling away is causally impossible, then no warnings are necessary and the admonitions of Scripture lose all seriousness.

The defender of perseverance may have an escape from this dilemma, however. He could maintain that (1) is false, but contend that the reason it is false is not because it is causally impossible for the believer to fall away, but because

4. If the warnings had not been given, then God would have provided some *other* means of guaranteeing that the believer would persevere in grace.

He could argue that in view of God's faithfulness and love for the elect, it is broadly logically impossible for a believer to fall away because in every possible world in which a believer exists God supplies some means of ensuring his perseverance. Since there simply are no possible worlds in which believers fall from grace, the closest worlds in which the antecedent of (1) is true must be worlds in which the believers persevere. The reasons they persevere may be multitudinous, and there is no reason to think that believers in any world are causally constrained to persevere. Nor may one infer from the falsity of (1) or the truth of (4) that the Scriptural warnings are not the means by which God guarantees in the actual world that believers persevere.

But the problem with such a response is that it does not clearly distinguish the classical doctrine of perseverance from a Molinist version of that doctrine. [6] The heart of the issue lies in the efficacy of God's grace: is God's grace intrinsically efficacious or extrinsically efficacious? According to the classic doctrine of perseverance, God's grace is intrinsically efficacious in producing its result, that is to say, grace infallibly causes its effect. But according to Molina, divine grace is extrinsically efficacious, that is to say, it becomes efficacious when conjoined with the free co-operation of the creaturely will. On Molina's view, God gives sufficient grace for salvation to all men, but it becomes

efficacious only in the lives of those who respond affirmatively to it.

Now within Molinism, there exists a school called Congruism which could agree quite happily to (4) and even to the broadly logical impossibility of a believer's falling from grace and yet insist that such a contention is in no way incompatible with the claims that the believer freely perseveres and even that it lies within the believer's power to renounce God's grace and apostasize. [7] Congruism, as represented, for example, by Suarez, holds that logically prior to God's decree of creation, God freely chose certain individuals to attain beatitude. Via His middle knowledge, God knew which gifts of grace would be efficacious in eliciting the free, affirmative response of these creaturely wills. Therefore, He decreed to create a world containing these individuals and to accord to them those gifts of grace to which He knew they would freely respond. These gifts are extrinsically, not intrinsically, efficacious in that the creaturely will is free to reject such grace, but since such gifts are selected according to God's middle knowledge, they are congruent to each created will and therefore infallibly are met with an affirmative response. God knows via His middle knowledge that even though the individual *could* reject His particular gifts of grace, in fact he *would* not. Suarez seems to suggest that in any logically possible world in which an elect individual exists, God bestows, based on His middle knowledge, congruent grace on that person which ensures his free response. Applied to the issue of perseverance, Congruism could maintain that God via His middle knowledge knows just what gifts of grace to accord in any possible world to each believer's will so as to elicit a continuing response of faith from that person. Hence, every believer will persevere to the end in whatever world he exists even though he is free and it lies within his power to reject any particular gifts of God's grace.

Such a Congruist doctrine of perseverance appears very paradoxical because even though the believer freely perseveres and is able to reject God's grace, nevertheless there are no logically possible worlds in which he apostasizes. Is such a doctrine coherent?

It does seem coherent, I think, for the Congruist to maintain that the believer freely perseveres even if he is not free to apostasize. That the believer freely perseveres is evident from the fact that for any *particular* congruent grace accorded him, there are worlds in which the believer rejects *that* grace. But via His middle knowledge, God in each of those worlds offers the believer some *other* gift of grace to which God knows the believer will freely respond. So even though there are no possible worlds in which a believer falls away, nonetheless believers persevere freely. The crucial point, once again, is that God's grace is only extrinsically efficacious, and therefore the believer's freedom is not causally constrained by God's action. [8]

But is the believer free to fall away and apostasize? On the one hand, it would seem not, since it is broadly logically impossible that he fall away. Surely if an agent is free to do some action *A*, then it

must be broadly logically possible for him to do *A*! But on the other hand, nothing causally constrains him in any world to persevere, so that the broadly logical impossibility of his apostasy depends on his free will. So how can he not be free? Part of the problem here is that the introduction of an Anselmian God into the sphere of broadly logical modality scrambles our intuitions of what ought to be regarded as broadly logically possible or necessary. For example, it seems intuitively obvious that a possible world exists in which the highest form of creaturely life is rabbits which exist in unremitting misery. But as Thomas Morris points out, such a world is in fact broadly logically impossible because it would be inconsistent with an Anselmian God. A maximally perfect being would not create a situation of such unremitting suffering. Thus, ". . . worlds are (at least partially) conceivable which if, *per impossible*, the Anselmian God did not exist, would be possible." [9] Similarly, in the case at hand we have what seems intuitively to be a logically possible world (one in which believers apostasize), but which turns out to be broadly logically impossible because God in His essential goodness always acts so as to win the free, affirmative response of believers to His grace. At the root of the paradox here seems to be a deficiency in the currently fashionable Stalnaker-Lewis type of theory of the truth conditions of counterfactual propositions, namely, the theory's inability to deal with counterfactuals having impossible antecedents. For what we really want to know is not whether (1) is true, but whether it is true that

1\*. If the warnings had not been given and God had provided no additional gifts of grace, the believers would have fallen away.

The problem is that on the view we are currently considering, the antecedent is broadly logically impossible because God is too good to fail to provide additional gifts of grace. Hence, having an impossible antecedent, (1\*) is vacuously true, but so is its contradictory, since there are no antecedent-permitting worlds. But intuitively we should want to say that (1\*) is false if God's grace is intrinsically efficacious and non-vacuously true if His grace is extrinsically efficacious. Hence, the Congruist would be justified in holding the believer to be free to fall away even if there are no worlds in which he exercises that freedom. This conclusion seems to bring out the truth of Plantinga's remark that the use of possible worlds is not apt to shed much light on the notion of "within one's power." [10]

But is the Congruist committed in any case to the position that there are no possible worlds in which believers fall away? Careful reflection suggests not. For the notion of congruent grace does not mean grace which *cannot* be rejected by the created will, but grace which is so suited to the created will that were it to be offered, it *would not* be rejected. Hence, possible worlds exist in which grace which would in fact be congruent and efficacious, were it offered, is rejected and, hence, inefficacious. Nor need such worlds be worlds in which some other grace offered by God is congruent. The Congruist can maintain that in some such worlds *every* grace offered by God is

rejected by the created will. The integrity of God's goodness and faithfulness to the believer is retained in such worlds because He offers the believer the greatest gracious help that He can, but the apostasizing believer rejects every gift of grace he is offered. Nor does such a possibility compromise the doctrine of perseverance, since the Congruist will maintain that such worlds are not feasible or realizable for God because the believer *would* in fact respond to such gracious helps were they actually to be offered. [11] In every world realizable by God, His various graces are congruent and efficacious; therefore, there is no realizable world in which believers fall away and are lost. This may seem odd at first because the word "feasible," which is normally used to describe the set of worlds realizable by God, tends to carry with it the connotation that worlds not feasible for God are worlds which He would like to actualize (like worlds in which all creatures always freely refrain from sin), but cannot because the creaturely wills fail to cooperate. But in the case of perseverance, God is no doubt pleased that worlds in which believers fall away are infeasible for Him, and that because the creaturely wills always *do* cooperate with His grace. Therefore, a Congruist doctrine of perseverance does not require that there are no logically possible worlds in which believers fall from grace.

In this light (4) may be more perspicuously expressed as

4.' If the warnings had not been given, God would have provided other gifts of grace and the believer would have responded freely to these.

The Congruist regards (4') as true, but holds that there are possible worlds in which the believer rejects all other gifts of divine grace offered to him; he adds merely that all such worlds are infeasible for God. It is therefore clear that while all truly regenerate believers will persevere to the end, nevertheless they are free to fall away.

Therefore, if the classical defender of perseverance is to distinguish his view from a Molinist perspective, he must do more than insist on the truth of (4). For the Congruist will also insist that believers always persevere in grace and that were the Scriptural warnings not to be given, God would have offered the believers some other gifts of grace which He knew to be congruent; but he will also insist that the believer is entirely free to reject God's grace and fall away. The classical defender of perseverance must, it seems, if he is to distinguish his view from Molinism, hold to the intrinsic efficacy of God's grace and, hence, the causal impossibility of the believer's apostasy. But in that case, the warnings of Scripture against the danger of apostasy seem to become otiose and unreal. Perhaps the best route for the classical defender to take is to adopt a sort of *admonitory occasionalism*: that on the occasion of warning the believer against apostasy God infuses His intrinsically efficacious grace for perseverance.

To maintain that the warnings of Scripture are the means by which God guarantees the perseverance of the elect is in fact to adopt a Molinist perspective. That perspective need not be so radical as Congruism. The Molinist who holds to the perseverance of the saints may regard (4) and (4') as false because, in counterdistinction to the Congruist, he holds that there are realizable worlds in which believers do reject God's grace and apostasize. That is to say, such worlds are not merely logically possible, but are feasible for God. But the Molinist who holds to perseverance will simply add that God would not decree to actualize any of these worlds, or even more modestly, that God did not in fact decree to actualize such a world. In the world He chose to actualize, believers always persevere in the faith. Perhaps the warnings in Scripture are the means by which God weakly actualizes their perseverance. That is to say, in the moment logically prior to creation, God via His middle knowledge knew who would freely receive Christ as Savior and what sorts of warnings against apostasy would be extrinsically efficacious in keeping them from falling away. Therefore, He decreed to create only those persons to be saved who He knew would freely respond to His warnings and thus persevere, and He simultaneously decreed to provide such warnings. On this account the believer will certainly persevere and yet he does so freely, taking seriously the warnings God has given him.

Of course, Molinism does not imply the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The defender of middle knowledge could hold that logically prior to creation God knew that there were no worlds feasible for Him in which all believers persevere or that, if there were, such worlds had overriding deficiencies in other respects. Therefore, the warnings of Scripture do not guarantee the perseverance of believers, for believers can and do ignore them. Nevertheless, it does seem to me that those who interpret the warnings of Scripture as the means by which God ensures the perseverance of the saints have abandoned the classic understanding of that doctrine and have adopted instead a middle knowledge perspective on perseverance.

## Footnotes

[\[1\]](#)

This appears to have been the position of John Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.3.21,24; 4.1.10; 4.24.6-11. See also his comments on Hebrews 6 and 10 in John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 12: *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, trans. Walter B. Johnston (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1963).



[\[2\]](#)

See I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1983).

[\[3\]](#)

See, for example, Judy Gundry-Wolf, "Perseverance and Falling Away in Paul's Thought" (D.Theol. dissertation, Eberhardt-Karls-Universität Tübingen, 1987); for a critique, see I.H. Marshall, "Election and Calling to Salvation in 1 and 2 Thessalonians," paper read at the 38th *Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense*, 1988, to be published in *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium*.

[\[4\]](#)

Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), p. 548.

[\[5\]](#)

I.e., that if the warnings had not been given, the believers would not have fallen away. The defender of perseverance might say that both (1) and its opposite are false; but I regard this position as implausible. See my critique of this position in *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), chap. 13.

[\[6\]](#)

See Luis Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of "De Liberi Arbitrii cum Gratia Donis, Praescientia, Providentia, Praedestinatione et Reprobatione Concordia,"* trans. with an Introduction and Notes by Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); William Lane Craig, *The Problem of Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents from Aristotle to Suarez*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 7 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), chaps. 7, 8; *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, ed. A. Vacant, E. Mangenot, and E. Amann (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et ane, 1929), s.v. "Molinisme," by E. Vansteenbergh, vol. 10, pt. 2, cols. 2094-2187.

[\[7\]](#)

See Francisco Suarez, *Opera omnia*, vol. 10: *Appendix prior: Tractatus de vera intelligentia auxilii efficacis, ejusque concordia cum libertate voluntarii consensus* 1, 12, 13, 14; idem *De concursu et auxilio Dei* 3.6, 14, 17, 20; Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents*, chap. 8; *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, s.v. "Congruisme," by H. Quillet, vol. 3, pt. 1, cols. 1120-38.

[\[8\]](#)

See the very stimulating remarks by Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 151-52. He imagines a case in which Jones's brain is wired with electrodes such that if he were to attempt to choose differently than he does choose, the electrodes would be activated and prevent that choice. "He could not possibly have done otherwise, but nothing apart from his own decisions as a matter of fact brought it about that he did as he did" (Ibid., p. 152). Substitute for the electrodes God's congruent grace, and we see that Jones freely perseveres even though there are no worlds in which he does not persevere. Indeed, since God's grace is, unlike the electrodes, only extrinsically efficacious, Jones's freely persevering is all the more evident.

[\[9\]](#)

Morris, *Logic of God Incarnate*, pp. 112-13.

[\[10\]](#)

Alvin Plantinga, "Ockham's Way Out," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986): 265.

[\[11\]](#)

On the notion of worlds feasible for God, see Thomas P. Flint, "The Problem of Divine Freedom," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1983): 257.