



Does Philippians 1:6 Teach Perseverance?

Dr. Charlie Bing

Published: Grace in Focus

February 1991

Synopsis: This verse may not mean what most people think it means. A closer look at the language helps with a biblically and theologically consistent interpretation.

[I am] confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Jerry and Stevie were teenage friends of mine. Both became addicted to drugs, joined a Christian rehabilitation program, were saved and stopped doing drugs. Through this program they grew some and share their testimony with many churches before finally returning to the neighborhood to witness to me and others.

However, with little guidance or follow-up, both eventually returned to the only life they knew and died drug-related deaths. Did they die Christians? I think they did. I heard their testimony of faith, saw their good works before they "backslid," and observed the conversions among their families and friends after their deaths.

Still, some would say that they could not have been Christians because they did not persevere in good works and godly living until the end of their lives. The first verse they would probably cite for support is **Philippians 1:6** where Paul says to that church, "being confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you *will complete it* until the day of Jesus Christ." Does this verse teach the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints?

The first question to answer is what Paul meant by "good work." The answer is in the context. Paul is recognizing their "fellowship in the gospel" (v. 5). The word *fellowship* (*koinonia*) has the basic meaning of *communion* or *something shared in common*. What was it the Philippian believers shared with Paul? Foremost in Paul's mind, and really the occasion for his writing, is their financial sharing (4:15-18). Epaphroditus had delivered the Philippians' gift and now Paul was sending him back with a "thank you note" and some information about his circumstances. In fact, in 4:15 Paul used the verbal form of *koinonia* when he said, "no church *shared* with me concerning giving and receiving except you only." The noun *koinonia* is actually translated "contribution" in other New Testament passages (**Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13; Heb. 13:6**).

Therefore, the "good work" of which Paul speaks is not sanctification in general. It is the Philippians' fellowship in the Gospel through giving.

To consider this verse a promise that all Christians will persevere in a godly lifestyle ignores the occasion, the context, and Paul's point. First, he is not addressing all Christians, but the Philippian believers specifically. Second, Paul is not speaking about lifestyle, but about the Philippians' support of his ministry. Third, he is not making a promise, but is only expressing his confident feelings.

Paul is confident that God will "complete" or carry through the impact of their support as its effects are multiplied in ministry to others until the return of Christ.

As a pastor, I have learned that if a person attends our church several times in a row, supports us financially, and volunteers to help out, I can be confident that God will continue to work in them to use them with us. But this is different from a guarantee they will always be faithful, and certainly gives me no right to make a statement about all Christians everywhere.

The fact is, Paul knew that all Christians do not persevere in godliness and righteous behavior until the end. He reminded the Corinthians that there were some in their church who had died from abusing the Lord's Supper (**1 Cor.**

11:30). Elsewhere in the Bible we find that a believer can persist in sin such that it leads to his or her death (**James 5:20; 1 John 5:16**). I think this explains what happened to Jerry and Stevie.

God works in believers to produce good works and progressively sanctify them, but the results are not always measurable and observable. Furthermore, His work is only carried out in concurrence and cooperation with the individual's will (cf. **Phil. 2:11-12**). Knowing these things, let us be careful not to use **Philippians 1:6** to condemn those who may genuinely be God's children. In reality, there are Christians who struggle with lifelong bad habits and weaknesses of will and discipline. There should be room in God's family for people like Jerry and Stevie.