

TULIP: A FREE GRACE PERSPECTIVE

PART 4: IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Can God’s gift of eternal life be resisted? Does God’s sovereignty require that He force selected people (the elect) to receive His gift of salvation and to enter into a holy union with Him? Is it an affront to God to suggest that the Holy Spirit can be successfully resisted? Calvinist or Reformed Theology, will usually reason that since God is all-powerfully sovereign and since man is completely and totally unable to believe in Christ, it is necessary that God enforce His grace upon those whom He has elected for eternal life. We will now consider the Calvinistic view and the Arminian response to this doctrine.

II. THE REFORMED VIEW OF IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

Hughes concisely says,

Irresistible grace is grace which cannot be rejected. The conception of the irresistibility of special grace is closely bound up with...the efficacious nature of that grace. As the work of God always achieves the effect toward which it is directed, so also it cannot be rejected or thrust aside.¹

Steele, Thomas, and Quinn present a slightly longer explanation—the doctrine of “The Efficacious Call of the Spirit or Irresistible Grace” saying,

In addition to the outward general call to salvation which is made to everyone who hears the gospel, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. The external call (which is made to all

¹ P. E. Hughes, “Grace,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 481.

without distinction) can be, and often is, rejected; however the internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion. By means of this special call the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ. He is not limited in His work of applying salvation by man's will, nor is He dependent upon man's cooperation for success. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ. God's grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.²

Thus, Reformation Theology distinguishes two separate "calls." The general, outward call (invitation) of the gospel is to all men. The special, inward call (application) by the Holy Spirit comes only to those who are elect.³ Berkhof states,

Reformed theology, however, insists on the *essential* difference between common and special grace. Special Grace is supernatural and spiritual; it removes the guilt and pollution of sin and lifts the sentence of condemnation. Common grace, on the other hand, is natural...It works only in the natural, and not the spiritual sphere. It should be maintained therefore that, while the two are closely connected in the present life, they are *essentially* different, and do not differ merely in degree.⁴

Since, in this view, the elect are, before salvation, totally depraved (i.e., unable to believe), the special, invincible, inward call must occur. The gospel invitation or "outward general call, extended to the elect and non-elect alike, will not bring sinners to Christ. Why? Because men are by nature dead in sin and are under its power. They are of themselves unable

² David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 1963, 2004), 7.

³ Laurence M. Vance says, "Besides the nomenclature of 'general' and 'effectual,' the common terms are 'external' and 'internal,' 'outer' and 'inward,' and 'general' and 'special.' Some Calvinists use all the terms interchangeably. There is one other set of terms that is perhaps more accurate, but this set is only used by non-Calvinists: 'insincere' and 'sincere,'" *The Other Side of Calvinism*, rev. ed. (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, 1999), 491.

⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 439.

and unwilling to forsake their evil ways and turn to Christ for mercy.”⁵ Accordingly, and this is distinctive, regeneration must occur *before* one can come to Christ. Steele, Thomas, and Quinn state,

Therefore, the *Holy Spirit*, in order to bring God’s elect to salvation, extends to them *a special inward call* in addition to the outward call contained in the gospel message. Through this special call the Holy Spirit performs a work of grace within the sinner which inevitably brings him to faith in Christ. The inward change wrought in the elect sinner enables him to understand and believe spiritual truth...This is accomplished through regeneration or the new birth by which the sinner is made a child of God and is given spiritual life. His will is renewed through this process so that the sinner spontaneously comes to Christ of his own free choice. Because he is given a new nature so that he loves righteousness, and because his mind is enlightened so that he understands and believes the Biblical gospel, *the renewed sinner freely and willingly turns to Christ as Lord and Savior*. Thus the once dead sinner is drawn to Christ by the inward supernatural call of the Spirit who *through regeneration makes him alive and creates faith and repentance within him*.⁶

When Steele, Thomas, and Quinn assert above that, “The inward change wrought in the elect sinner enables him to understand and believe spiritual truth” they equate *conversion* (the reformation of one’s life, turning from sin, loving righteousness, etc.) with *regeneration* (the new birth).⁷ In doing so, they conclude that the elect are first given a new

⁵ Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, 52-53.

⁶ Ibid., 53, italics added.

⁷ Chafer, after explaining the physical implications of the term *conversion*, i.e., that of being “turned about,” speaks of the spiritual implications. He quotes 1 Thess 1:9-10 and thus distinguishes *conversion* from *salvation* saying, “Being only the human action of mind and will, conversion in the moral or spiritual sense is not equivalent to salvation, which in all its mighty transformations is ever and only a work of God for the individual who exercises faith in Christ. This second and more important aspect of the term *conversion* may indicate no more than reformation. It is the foremost counterfeit of true salvation. When doing the work of an evangelist, it is possible to secure conversions which are self-wrought, moral changes quite apart from genuine salvation with its forgiveness, new birth, and imputed righteousness. The student would do well to avoid the use of the word *conversion* when salvation is in view.” (Lewis Sperry Cha-

nature and spiritual life through the new birth, and then, *because* of this newly imposed spiritual life, the elect sinner is *able* to believe the biblical gospel. Therefore, according to the Calvinist view, the supernatural impartation of life (i.e., regeneration) *precedes* belief in Christ.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) demonstrates this, as well,

I. All those whom God hath predestined unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds, spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ; *yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.*

II. This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man; who is altogether passive therein, until, being *quicken*ed and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby *enabled* to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.

III. Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.

IV. Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never [sic.] so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature and the law of that religion they do profess;

fer, *Systematic Theology* [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948], 7:93). William Evans defines regeneration simply as "a spiritual quickening, a new birth," *Great Doctrines of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 152. New birth or regeneration may be the *basis* for a subsequent moral turn around, but it is not equal to conversion.

and to assert and maintain that they may is very pernicious, and to be detested.⁸

Essentially, therefore, the *effectual call* is what we might simply understand as *regeneration imposed*. The imposition of new life or *renewal* is, according to the view, an enablement. This enablement follows or coincides with the acquisition of new life with the result that the sinner, “being *quickened and renewed* by the Holy Spirit...is thereby *enabled*.”⁹

The Westminster Confession uses the phrases “effectually to call” and “effectual call” rather than “irresistible” in the explanation of the doctrine. It asserts that men may *freely* come to Christ only when *made* willing to do so. Only when man is quickened and renewed by the Spirit is he able to embrace the grace offered in the call of God. So, the assertion that the non-elect individual sinner can “never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved,” as per section IV above, follows logically from the idea that he has never been *made* to *freely* come. Having never been made to freely come, the sinner would not have actually resisted God’s will or His grace because such grace would never have been actually imposed upon him.

That men cannot believe *of themselves* and that they will not believe *apart from an overwhelming force* (the Holy Spirit) is the basis for the doctrine. God’s saving grace is irresistible only to those upon whom it is divinely imposed. The non-elect, those not so “effectually called,” and, indeed, those for whom Christ did not die are not actively rejecting the gospel call or resisting God’s grace because God is not extending such grace to them. There is nothing for them to resist.

MacArthur refers to this as an inevitable reception of God’s invitation,

“Called” refers not to an outward call, but an inward one. It speaks of when God turns around a person’s heart—a heart that could never turn to God, know Him, understand the Gospel, or know hope on its own. We know this refers to a saving call because of the context of Romans 8:30...The calling here

⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter 10. *Creeeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 206, italics added.

⁹ Ibid.

is an effectual call. It's not an invitation to just anyone; it's an invitation that will inevitably be received.¹⁰

Thus, God's saving grace is not resistible, but inevitable.

The Canons of Dort (1618-19) speak of Irresistible Grace and reject the idea of human freedom saying:

But that others are called by the gospel, obey the call, and are converted, is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will, whereby one distinguishes himself above others equally furnished with grace sufficient for faith and conversion, as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains; but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who as he has chosen his own from eternity in Christ, so he confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of his own dear Son...¹¹

It would seem that Dort would argue against any freedom of the will (and thus, any responsibility) at all. Faith is not a human response to the offer of eternal life, but is rather *conferred* upon the elect who stand stonily before God.

Enns summarizes the position, "Common grace is extended to all mankind but is insufficient to save anyone. Through irresistible grace God drew to Himself those whom He had elected, *making them willing* to respond."¹²

III. THE ARMINIAN VIEW OF RESISTIBLE GRACE

Steele, Thomas, and Quinn present a summary of the Arminian understanding that "The Holy Spirit Can be Effectively Resisted":

The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are called outwardly by the gospel invitation; He does all that He can to bring every sinner to salvation. But inasmuch as man is free, he can successfully resist the Spirit's call. The Spirit cannot regenerate the sinner until he believes; faith (which is man's contribution) precedes and makes possible the new birth. Thus, man's free

¹⁰ John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to Be Sure of Your Salvation* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1992), 60-61.

¹¹ Canons of Dort, III, IV:10.

¹² Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 491, italics added.

will limits the Spirit in the application of Christ's saving work. The Holy Spirit can only draw to Christ those who allow Him to have His way with them. Until the sinner responds, the Spirit cannot give life. God's grace, therefore, is not invincible; it can be, and often is, resisted and thwarted by man.¹³

Not only is there a disagreement as to whether grace unto salvation can be resisted, but also a disparity as to whether both common grace and special grace actually exist as relates to the salvation experience. It would seem that, according to Arminianism, the outward, general call and the inward, special call are essentially one and the same. If God calls outwardly and also calls inwardly, one might ask "What's the difference?" Enns says that the opponents to the Calvinistic doctrine (i.e., those who hold to Arminianism) "might suggest that if grace is irresistible then God forces someone to come against his own will."¹⁴ It is clear, that to Arminianism, human freedom is paramount. The teaching of "special grace" is thus the *problem* and is rejected by those of Arminian persuasion. Arminianism would hold that, "Through prevenient or preparatory grace,¹⁵ which is given to all people, man is able to cooperate with God and respond to Him in salvation. Prevenient grace reverses the effects of Adam's sin."¹⁶

Arminianism recognizes to some extent the ill effects of Adam's sin on the race of humanity and provides (for lack of a better word) a *simple* answer. The Arminian answer is that God universally supplies what is called *prevenient* or enabling grace to everyone so that all who hear the gospel are thus enabled to freely respond. Thus the sinful, God-rejecting nature of humanity has been given enough grace to serve as an enabling factor so that man indeed has freedom of the will in the matter of believing or rejecting the gospel. The *simple* answer presupposes that man would be completely unable to respond to God *if* supplied no such prevenient grace. But if the doctrine of Total Depravity is erroneous (and a misnomer), and if total depravity does not necessitate inability to respond

¹³ Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, 7.

¹⁴ Enns, 484.

¹⁵ "Prevenient grace is grace which comes first. It precedes all human decision and endeavor. Grace always means that it is God who takes the initiative and applies priority of God's action on behalf of needy sinners," (Hughes, "Grace," 480).

¹⁶ Enns, 491.

freely, there would be no need for the doctrine of prevenient grace. Why not just say that man is not totally depraved and be done with it? If man, having been made in God's image, *is* indeed *able* to believe, it would not be inconceivable for man to freely respond to Him in whose image he was created.

IV. AN EVALUATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

A. IT IS BASED ON MAN'S TOTAL INABILITY TO BELIEVE

Palmer, in his chapter on Irresistible Grace under a section which asserts the scriptural basis of the doctrine says, "The Five Points of Calvinism all depend on each other. If **T** is true, then **U** is true, and so are **L**, **I**, and **P**. They all hang or fall together. Let us...see how irresistible grace depends on them."¹⁷ A few pages later he says, "All the Biblical illustrations of the new birth, which presupposes man's total inability or depravity, indicate that man is unable to resist God's purposes in election"¹⁸ and follows with several illustrations: First, he asserts, "The Bible claims that natural man is dead in his sins. He has no spiritual life. A dead man cannot resist the resurrecting powers of God."¹⁹ He says that a "second illustration of God's work in man's heart is [physical] birth. Now it is obviously foolish to speak of anybody refusing to be born. People have no choice about being born."²⁰ Third, he suggests that, "Another illustration is creation (II Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:5; Eph. 2:10). Nothing that was ever created refused to be created."²¹

These illustrations are designed to argue for the inability of man to resist God's purposes in election. But, upon analysis, *none* of these illustrations correspond to the fact that man is made in the image of God and has the *responsibility* (and, therefore, an ability) to trust God. In response, his first illustration does not correspond because a physically dead man has no responsibility because he has no ability to think or reason. A living man does. While it may be said that the "natural man" (i.e.,

¹⁷ Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Guardian, 1972), 60, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

the dead man in Palmer's illustration) cannot receive or understand the comparison and evaluation of spiritual things with other spiritual things,²² it simply does not follow that the natural man cannot *understand* the gospel message. The problem is that the natural, unregenerate man *does* understand the gospel and, because he understands it, it *offends* him.²³ If he does understand the gospel (i.e., the outward call of God to humanity universally), then he must be able to respond. If he is able to respond, then he is not totally depraved in the sense of being totally unable to believe. If he is not totally depraved in that sense, then there is no need for the doctrine of irresistible grace (and, therefore, God can hold man fully accountable for his response to the gospel message).

The second illustration lends no support for total depravity either. An unborn child indeed has no ability to resist being born because he is not given an alternative. It is agreed that he has no ability to respond, but a living man who hears the gospel does have alternatives and a responsibility (and, thus, an ability) to trust God. An unborn child simply isn't in an arena wherein such freedom applies and to use an illustration that, again, is not analogous to the situation proves nothing. Palmer's illustration again fails to demonstrate his point.

Regarding Palmer's third illustration, it is conceded that that which does not exist has no power to resist being created by the fiat or decree of God. But that which does not exist is purely fictional, not actual. Only that which exists is real. That God's call is irresistible is in no way demonstrated by using this self-contradictory, even impossible, illustration.

A nonexistent entity is, at the very best, a figment of one's imagination. In fact, it is impossible to envision or imagine a nonexistent thing. What form would it have? What color is it? How big? But man *is* an extant being. Man could not be a nonexistent being because there *are* no nonexistent beings. A nonexistent being that exists is a logical contradiction. So, again Palmer's logically impossible illustration fails to support the contention that a spiritually dead man is unable to believe. Perhaps his dependence upon such non-decisive illustrations demonstrates the weakness of the point he is attempting to prove.

In relation to the idea of man's total depravity (inability), C. Gordon Olson points out:

²² Cf. 1 Cor 2:13-14.

²³ Cf. Rom 9:33; Gal 5:11; and 1 Pet 2:8.

There is a strong logical connection between the Calvinistic notion of man's total inability...and their doctrine of irresistible grace. Non-Calvinists also believe that man is totally unable to save himself, but we reject the idea that man is totally unable to repent and believe in Christ. Arminians have solved the problem with their doctrine of prevenient (preparing) grace, which does not have any inductive basis...I have...emphasized the importance of the convicting work of the Spirit as the key.²⁴ In any case, the Scripture is clear that man is responsible to repent and believe, thus implying the ability to do so.²⁵ In no case is irresistible grace a necessary or viable answer. It is a solution to a problem which does not exist!²⁶

The problem does exist, though, but it exists because of adherence to the system of Calvinism rather than inductive research into the actual statements of Scripture. So, it seems that *neither* the Arminian imposition on the doctrine of prevenient grace nor the self-imposed Calvinistic assertion of man's total inability to believe (along with the imposition of eternal life as a means by which belief is possible) are viable options. The Calvinist asserts, regarding only the elect, that "they come *most freely*, being *made willing* by his grace" and "being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby *enabled* to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it."²⁷ This seems somewhat similar to what Arminians would call *prevenient* or *preparatory grace* upon all mankind, not just the elect. In both views, God must enable man.

If, as in the Calvinist view, the Spirit of God must quicken, renew, and enable a totally depraved [read, "unable to believe"] sinner to answer the call, what is the *practical* difference between that and the Arminian

²⁴ To use language of modern law, it would seem that the convicting work of the Holy Spirit gives *opportunity* for the one so convicted to plead either guilty or not guilty. A plea of guilty would bring an immediate reliance on the cross of Christ as its remedy, but a plea of not guilty would result in continued condemnation. Compare this with John 3:18.

²⁵ If *responsibility* does not mean *response-ability*, i.e., *ability to respond*, what, indeed, might the term mean?

²⁶ C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002), 235.

²⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter 10, italics added.

teaching of prevenient grace whereby God just enables everyone? If the difference is seen as the sovereign imposition of eternal life upon the elect (for whom Christ specifically died), as per the Calvinist, versus the gracious preparation of all men (for whom Christ universally died), but without divine compulsion (as per the Arminian), fine! We've seen the distinction between the two theological systems. But why does the Calvinist feel the need to soften the term "irresistible" by using the terms "effectual" or "efficacious"? Why assert that the elect, being passive and having no say in the matter, cannot resist the Spirit, but assert, at the same time, that he can "come most freely." Obviously, the reason is the dynamic between God's sovereignty and man's freedom, but, as shown in a previous article,²⁸ these concepts need not be adverse, contradictory, or disparate. They can, and actually do, exist compatibly and non-contradictorily in complete accord with one another.

B. IT CORRESPONDS TO THE IDEA OF UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

Palmer reasons:

If it is true that God has unconditionally elected some to be saved...then, of course, the Spirit has to work in an irresistible way. Otherwise, everyone because of his depravity would reject Christ, and then there would be no foreordination to eternal life. God could not be sure that those whom He elected would believe and be saved. The certainty of election means that the Spirit works certainly and that He accomplishes what God foreordained. Without the irresistible grace of God, there could be no foreordination or election.²⁹

The key words in Palmer's statement may be, "If it is true..." because if it is not true, or more precisely, if Palmer's *understanding* of unconditional election is not true, then there would be no need to assert irresistible grace as a doctrine. Palmer uses John 6:37, 44 to argue that Jesus taught irresistible grace. It is admitted that Jesus said, "No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). Palmer would argue that the certainty of the result as well as the meaning of the term "draw" demonstrates the doctrine. Draw, he argues, is used of

²⁸ See Anthony B. Badger, "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 1: Total Depravity," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2003): 35-61.

²⁹ Palmer, 61.

drawing fish irresistibly in a net (John 21:6, 11),³⁰ of Peter drawing his sword irresistibly to cut off Malchus's ear (John 18:10), Paul and Silas being drawn or dragged into the marketplace (Acts 16:19), and Paul being dragged out of the temple (Acts 21:30) by an irresistible mob.³¹ "In each of these cases, the object is drawn irresistibly."³² The force which extracts the fish, draws Peter's sword, and transports Paul and Silas couldn't be resisted. It was too great. He compares this with the compulsion the Father must use toward His elect.

Geisler's answers to the idea that "drawing" is irresistible are summarized as follows: 1) Words have a range of meaning and must be understood in the context; 2) Obviously, John 12:32 ("And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself") would not be taken as compulsive in nature, but would rather refer to a moral pull on one's life. So also Jer 31:3, "With loving kindness I have drawn you;" 3) The context of being drawn in John 6:44 is that of those who believe (John 6:40, 47, 65).³³ Based on these verses and John 1:17 Geisler explains that "From this it is evident that their understanding of Jesus' teaching and being drawn to the Father was accompanied through their own free choice."³⁴ Again, when considering unconditional election as a basis for the doctrine of irresistible grace, we are faced with a denial of man's freedom in the matter. Actual freedom is not only logical, but biblical.

Palmer argues that Jesus' statement that He has other sheep and that He must bring them into His fold as well (John 10:16) demonstrates: 1) He must irresistibly do so; 2) Jesus infallibly secures all His sheep; and 3) The means of His doing this is to send the Holy Spirit so as to draw them irresistibly.³⁵ The refutation to this is simply to point out that neither the verse nor the context say anything about irresistibility. The other sheep would necessarily become believers, but this verse does not address how or why they were to become believers. It certainly does not rule out human freedom in the matter.

³⁰ Ibid., 61-62.

³¹ Ibid., 62.

³² Ibid.

³³ Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 95.

³⁴ Ibid., 96.

³⁵ Palmer, 62.

In using Rom 8:29-30 in his argument, Palmer says, “The word ‘called’ does not refer to an external, verbal call; but in accord with the rest of the New Testament, it means in addition to the external call the working of God of an inward affirmative response.”³⁶ But again, this begs the question. Not only does he *assume* a distinction between the general call by means of the gospel (externally) and a special irresistible call (internally), but he *assumes* that God’s foreknowledge and foreordination are something that has already occurred *exclusively* in the ancient, pre-creation past. In doing so, he ignores the dynamic of God’s timeless, eternal nature. God is no more ordaining things now than he ever has, or than He ever will. He is immutable and His counsels are eternal (i.e., without change and without time constraints of any kind. His eternal unchanging existence, simply does not follow any kind of past, present, or future distinction). Additionally, there is no valid reason to disallow God from sovereignly working out His plan within the progress of history in accord with His eternal, timeless plan. In fact, what He does today *is* His eternal timeless plan.³⁷

Other passages are used to argue for unconditional election as a basis to support the doctrine of the irresistibility of grace. Passages such as Rom 9:15 (“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy”) and Rom 9:18 (“He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills, He hardens”) refers in context to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (cf. Exod 7:3-4). It is noted, however, that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first (Exod 7:13; 8:15). God hardened Pharaoh’s heart further in accord with Pharaoh’s rejection of the truth. Additionally, Rom 9:19 (“You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will’”) is explained, first, by noting that the verse is a question, not an affirmation. Second, the question is that of an objector, not the Apostle. Third, Paul refutes the objector’s question and the implication by saying, “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God” (9:20) and, in doing so, demonstrates that the objector is actually in the process of resisting

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See Anthony B. Badger, “Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 2: Unconditional Election,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Fall 2003):17-42.

God's will.³⁸ The idea that God's will cannot be resisted is disproved here!³⁹

Thus, if God has indeed, according to His eternal purpose, conclusively and without regard for human freedom, selected only some for salvation, it could be argued that for the sake of His eternal purpose He *must* comply with His own decision and, thus, assure that His perfect plan will not be thwarted. If an elect person could be perceived as resisting His will in the matter of salvation, then certainly God's eternal purpose would be fragmented.

Therefore, God's sovereignty is perceived as being in danger of destruction by the Calvinist *only* if a person: 1) believes that election was a *past tense event*; 2) misunderstands God's attribute of eternity and, therefore, His timeless nature; and 3) has no perception that God is working out His eternal unchanging plan as time continues in a *present tense* mode. But if we understand election from God's eternally present nature, there is no valid threat to the idea of His sovereignty, the progression of His plan in time, or the ordained outcome of all things as He works toward the best of all possible worlds in which sin is defeated and in which He is freely and genuinely worshipped in spirit and truth. His sovereignty is not fragmented, but rather cemented, by his allowance of human freedom apart from the arbitrary imposition of life onto those who do not freely believe in Him. The only condition for salvation is belief and God responds to faith, but there is no biblical assertion that He must save *anyone* as a prerequisite of His victory or the maintenance of His sovereignty.

³⁸ See Geisler, 90-96 for a detailed consideration of these arguments and for a consideration of the following passages which are used to assert the irresistible nature of grace: Rom 9:21, 22; Luke 14:23; John 6:44; Jas 1:18; and John 3:27.

³⁹ To press the matter further, if the objector to whom Paul is replying is regenerated, he would be resisting God's will about a facet of the doctrine of salvation. If the objector is not regenerate, it could be said that a non-elect person could resist God's will and one would have to conclude that God's will can be resisted, but only by the non-elect. But in order to be a non-elect objector, the objector would have to, at least, *understand* Paul's assertion and this fact would demonstrate that the unregenerate objector was indeed able to understand *some* spiritual things, especially if he mentally processes those things while forming the objection.

C. IT RELIES UPON THE IDEA OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

Palmer writes:

The Bible teaches that from eternity God foreloved certain people, and that He therefore sent His Son to die for them...Jesus actually did die for them. He did not just pretend to take away their sins. He did not theoretically go to hell for them. He actually did bear their sins and take their guilt away. It is either-or. Either Jesus saved them or He did not. Either He was an actual substitute or he was not. The Bible teaches He was.

If Christ has actually made them free from the guilt of sin, and if salvation comes only by faith, then it is necessary for God to send His Holy Spirit into their lives in order that they may accept the salvation that has already been worked out for them. Acceptance of Christ cannot be left partially to man for then all would refuse, and Christ's atonement would have been in vain. Thus limited atonement points to the irresistible work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

This argument is similar in nature to the one relating to unconditional election. It also shows the inter-dependence of one point of Calvinism upon the others. The Calvinist argument here is that God's intention and purpose (to save only those for whom Christ died) would be thwarted if the Holy Spirit should fail to apply that benefit to each and every such selected person for whom Christ died. The only way to guarantee that God's intention is not defeated is to argue that the Holy Spirit must use irresistible, divine power in affecting that salvation upon the elected, specifically redeemed sinner. By arguing, as Palmer does, that Christ actually saved those so unconditionally elected, it is reasoned that if any or all of those would be *able to resist* the application of the same, then it would be possible that one or all of the elect for whom Christ specifically died might ultimately be lost. The argument may be framed this way:

1. God unconditionally—and with certainty—elected some to eternal salvation on the basis of Christ's historical, substitutionary death.
2. Christ died as a substitutionary sacrifice only for those whom God had so chosen and, in doing so, saved them.

⁴⁰ Palmer, 60-61.

3. Therefore, the Holy Spirit must, by His divine power, apply the benefits of Christ's death to save each person in the group of the elect, and only those individuals, or else God's intent and purpose in Christ's atonement would be thwarted.

When Palmer says that Jesus' death either saved them or it did not, he restricts our thinking (insisting on either-or) and refuses to consider any other possible alternative. We have dealt with this reasoning in a former article⁴¹ and have shown that while Christ's death does, with certainty, save those who believe in Him, His death is of a *provisional nature* and is not *practically and personally* applicable, in an eternal way, until such time as a sinner becomes convinced of the gospel truth. In other words, Christ death does indeed save, but it doesn't save apart from a free response, i.e., personal faith in Him. It is pointless to say that Christ's death saves without including (and insisting upon) the human response that makes such deliverance possible. The distinction is this: We are saved *by grace alone* (God's kind and loving attitude toward humanity which rules out human merit) *through faith alone* (man's free response to the gospel message and to God's promise of eternal life) *in Christ alone* (because of His finished, bloody, sacrificial death—which is the *sufficient provision* and the *historical basis* for the gospel message). The elect are not saved by Christ's death apart from their personal faith in Him.

It seems regrettable that this would need to be argued or so specifically articulated at all, but, because the Calvinistic system of thought reasons otherwise, it must be done. That system *supposes* human inability to believe (rather than the actual inability of man to *do* anything to merit salvation, thus ruling out faith as a free response), *asserts* that God unconditionally chose those to whom He will show salvation mercy (again, apart from His knowledge/consideration of their faith as a free, personal response), *instructs* that Christ died only for that group so composed of selected persons (thus opening no way for a legitimate call for *all men* to believe), and *teaches* that God, by the irresistible power of the Holy Spirit, imposes eternal life upon the select group in order for those in that group to believe (thus extinguishing the idea of our personal

⁴¹ See Anthony B. Badger, "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 3: Limited Atonement," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2004): 33-56.

responsibility to not only recognize our personal sin and guilt, but also to trust the Savior).

D. IT IS NOT A BIBLICAL PHRASE

The term “irresistible grace” is not found in the Bible. This fact doesn’t make it wrong because some theological words like “trinity” or “rapture” (neither of which are in the biblical text) reflect an accurate conclusion of theological thought. It does, however, require that the one who asserts the term or the doctrine support it with biblical ideas, words, or concepts. The fourth letter in TULIP, which stands for “Irresistible,” appears to be more of an accommodation for mnemonic purposes than a precisely correct way of conveying biblical truth. As such, it seems that the “I” goes too far. Buswell says,

Perhaps the phrase, “irresistible grace,” by which this doctrine is often designated, psychologically inclines the mind to a horizon entirely too limited. Of course, it is true that men resist the grace of God...

The plan of God is not symmetrical. Those who are lost are lost “because” they have resisted the grace of God in Christ (John 3:18)...It is better to call this doctrine “infallible” grace.⁴²

But even calling it infallible grace may lead us astray. Again, there is no such term in the Bible called infallible grace. Irresistibility or infallibility are still terms which describe a theological conclusion. Geisler observes that, “some seem embarrassed by the term and use softer words like ‘effectual grace.’”⁴³ Palmer, himself, apparently understands the problem with the term *irresistible*. He softens the harsher implication of the term saying, “*Irresistible* means that when God has chosen some to be saved and when He sends His Spirit to change them from being hateful to being loving, no one can resist Him. He is irresistible. He does what He sets out to do.”⁴⁴

He continues to say that we ought “not misunderstand the word *irresistible*. To some it may give the meaning of causing someone to do what

⁴² J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1962), 2:145.

⁴³ Geisler, 90.

⁴⁴ Palmer, 57.

he does not want to do.”⁴⁵ He then gives what he considers to be *incorrect* analogies of what “irresistible” means. To him, *irresistible* does not mean: 1) an irresistible avalanche sweeping someone to his death; 2) an irresistible power of the state to imprison a preacher who opposes Communism; and 3) a young child being taken by an irresistibly strong kidnapper. Palmer, by this, argues that the term *irresistible* is not “God forcing people to do what they do not want to do”⁴⁶ and says that if the term *irresistible* causes misunderstanding, one might use terms such as “*efficacious*, or *effectual*, or *unconquerable*, or *certain*.”⁴⁷ It seems that Palmer and others do indeed see the problem with the term, but then rather than refute it, they go on to explain or soften it. Again, one might ask why use the term if it doesn’t actually suggest what is believed or asserted.

V. CONCLUSION

Palmer, in our discussion above, has used three different sets of “threes” to illustrate or argue for the fact of irresistible grace. Please recall the argumentation by illustration and analogy. First, as noted above, Palmer used three illustrations to show that *man is unable to respond, believe, or resist* God’s purposes in election: 1) a dead man cannot do anything, therefore a spiritually dead man cannot believe; 2) an unborn child is unable to say whether or not he will be born, therefore a person cannot cause or affect the imposition of life by the Holy Spirit; and 3) a nonexistent being cannot speak to, and has no say in, the imposition of existence by the Creator, therefore, a man cannot and isn’t able to speak to or choose, one way or the other, as to whether he will be recreated or regenerated.

Then, he argued *against man being able to resist* the compulsion of God’s “drawing” the elect sinner to Christ by suggesting that: 1) fish are powerless to resist being extracted from a net; 2) Peter’s sword could not resist being drawn from its sheath; and 3) Paul and Silas had insufficient power to resist being transported by the mob.

Finally, he has argued that irresistible grace does *not* mean such things as: 1) an irresistible avalanche sweeping someone to his death;

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

2) an irresistible power of the state to imprison a preacher who opposes Communism; and 3) a young child being taken by an irresistibly strong kidnapper.

We might summarize His argument as follows: 1) Man has no ability and, therefore, cannot believe the gospel; 2) Man is powerless to resist the Spirit; 3) God doesn't make anybody do anything; and 4) He *makes* the elect believe in Christ in accordance with His sovereign plan. Rather confusing, isn't it?

Another question: How is it that irresistibility is *like* Paul being transported by a mob and, at the same time, *unlike* a modern preacher being arrested by Communists? Illustrations are fine things to aid in visualizing truth, but contradictory illustrations and concepts make us wonder if it is really truth that is being illustrated. Without doubt, the assertiveness of the Calvinistic system along with the weakness and somewhat convoluted reasoning brings the whole system into serious doubt.

Olson says this:

I would suggest that the doctrine of irresistible grace has been derived by Augustinians through a deductive process from the other points of the TULIP, rather than through a careful inductive exegetical study of all the relevant Scripture. The historical context of the favorite proof texts needs to be given weightier consideration, the presuppositions ought to be brought out into the open and examined thoroughly, and more careful study of the usage of the term "calling" needs to be done.⁴⁸

Here's the question: How is it possible for someone with no ability to believe the gospel and with no ability or power to resist the Spirit's will to be personally *responsible* for believing or rejecting the gospel message? Faith is the single biblical condition for regeneration, but the Calvinist position insists: 1) that man can't believe and is powerless to do so and 2) that God must regenerate only those so elected for salvation *because* he has already elected some and He cannot fail.

A solution to the Calvinist dilemma might be to remove ourselves emotionally (and even theologically) from the matter and to reason together. That all men descend from Adam and are guilty of sin argues for man's lost condition and the universal need for eternal life. That the

⁴⁸ Olson, 253.

gospel message is intended for the whole world of mankind not only suggests that everyone needs eternal life, but also asserts its efficiency (as well as the sufficiency) to regenerate anyone and everyone in the whole world who hears that message and believes in Christ. The gospel message itself is indeed “whosoever will” (John 3:16). This fact in no way relegates the Holy Spirit to obscurity. The omnipresent Holy Spirit regenerates the sinner *as he believes the gospel*. Such regeneration is a divinely powerful act, but it is always performed in conjunction with faith in Christ. So, since the need is universal (sin), the message is universal (the gospel), and the condition for regeneration is universal (faith in Christ), it follows that the effect and efficiency of God’s plan in accord with the gospel offer to all is universal, as well.

Earl D. Radmacher clarifies this by affirming that, “the universal offer is also a genuine offer. The cross of Christ is broad enough and deep enough to cover all the sins of everyone who will come to Him.”⁴⁹ He continues, “Even though the offer of this great gift from God is genuine and available to all, many do not receive it by believing in Jesus Christ”⁵⁰ and quotes John 1:11-12 and 3:18-19 as support. The Bible simply places the responsibility of belief directly on the one who hears the clear gospel message. It disallows any excuse for unbelief. So, we might ask, what is the difference between the general, outward call of God and the specific, inward call? Radmacher continues to explain:

When Jewish leaders persecuted Jesus and sought to kill Him, He got to the heart of their problem: “But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” ([John] 5:40). The general call of the gospel becomes effective when it is joined with faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ; “He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son” (1 John 5:10).⁵¹

Notice the simple and clear wording when Radmacher says, “The general call of the gospel becomes effective when it is joined with faith.” The difference between the general call and the effectual call of God is this: The *general* call is the *message announced* to all, i.e., the invitation. The *effectual* call is the message believed, the *invitation received*, and

⁴⁹ Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 92.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

the correspondingly powerful work of the Holy Spirit that, at the time of faith, produces eternal life in the one who believes. The *effectual* call is the *gospel message joined with faith*, and the explanation need be no more complicated than that.

There is no necessity, either biblically, logically, or otherwise, to insist that the Holy Spirit imposes eternal life on anyone in an irresistible fashion, makes them willing, makes them willing to be willing, or gives them faith, etc. so as to fulfill God's sovereign plan. This is so because His sovereign plan insists upon human responsibility, and thus, human freedom. And human freedom is validated when one freely believes in Christ alone.

So, can the gift of eternal life be resisted? The biblical answer (which must be considered "outside the Calvinist box") is yes. The gifts of God, salvation or otherwise, are never imposed by an irresistible force, but are simply and freely received.

Does God's sovereignty or absolute control of the universe require us to conclude that He forces selected people (the elect) to receive His gift of salvation and to enter into a holy union with Him? No, because he has made mankind an offer which cannot be exceeded. God is not indebted to us, nor is He obligated to save us. Now, if Jesus' death was intended to benefit only the elect, the Holy Spirit would indeed be obligated to save those for whom His death was intended. But if Jesus' death was intended for *all*, God would in *no way* be under obligation.

Is it an affront to God to suggest that the Holy Spirit can be resisted? No, because, again, the question presupposes that rejection of the gospel offer for eternal life is the same as personal resistance to the Holy Spirit while the Holy Spirit is somehow pressing and pressuring the sinner for a decision. Rather, the rejection of Christ is indeed resistance to the *message* that the Holy Spirit has inspired. Radmacher notes:

In the general call in Philippi God led Lydia to listen to what the preachers said ("Lydia heard us," Acts 16:4). Then what happened? The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul." She listened to all four speakers intently, but the Holy Spirit used Paul's message to open her heart...In Lydia's case all the elements are present: the message of the human witnesses; the convicting of the Holy Spirit, the response of

the listener, the opening of Lydia's heart, the place of deepest reflection, and the effectual calling (salvation).⁵²

It is also not a question of whether or not one *can* resist the power of the Holy Spirit if He decides to have His way, but a question of whether the Holy Spirit must *necessarily* override human freedom. The resistance of humanity before Jesus' crucifixion could have been alleviated by Christ simply praying for twelve legions of angels (Matt 26:53), but just because He had the power to do so, didn't mean that He imposed or activated that power.

It is not a question of whether the gift of salvation and eternal life is irresistibly imposed upon someone, but whether the gift is graciously offered by God and then received freely by man. It is not a question as to whether God's sovereignty is endangered, but whether His sovereignly designed plan for human salvation includes human freedom in such a way as to allow man to believe the good news.

Our responsibility, it seems, is not to conjecture about the invisible working of the Spirit of God, but for each of us to certify *with clarity* the message of the gospel to those who do not possess eternal life. If we maintain our personal integrity, nourish our walk with the Lord Jesus, and relinquish the supposed entitlements offered by the modern world, we will attain a dignified platform of life from which to present the gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁵² Ibid., 106.