

CALVINISM AND PREACHING

(4) IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

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It is a commonly held position in the church world that one either accepts or rejects God's efforts to save.

It is said, too, that the only way to do the work of evangelism and missions is by seeking to persuade the objects of that work to accept Christ as their personal Saviour. It is said that everyone must be told that it is his responsibility to open his heart and to let the waiting Saviour into his heart and life. Whether anyone is saved or not is, thus, ultimately dependent upon the exercise of his freewill to accept or reject Christ. And when this commonly held position is challenged by an insistence that God's grace cannot be resisted, the response often given is the generalisation that there is then no need to do the work of evangelism and missions.

Throughout history the Reformed fathers have faced and answered this unbiblical teaching and the rash generalisation which accompanies it. They have answered with theology clearly based on the Word of God, and with a practice of prayerfully and unceasingly doing the work of evangelism and missions. When their position was ridiculed with slanderous caricatures, these Reformed fathers defended their position with more Scripture and with more ardent labours in missions.

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The truth of the matter is that the Bible teaches that God's grace is always effectual, that is, irresistible. It is equally true that the only way to do the work of missions and evangelism is with a firm grasp of the truth of the irresistible grace of God.

It is a tremendous reassurance to know that every sinner can be overcome by the power of God's grace, to know that the most hardened sinner can be like putty in the hands of the sovereign Potter. What a relief it is to know that the dispensing of salvation is not dependent upon how often or how well I witness. What

courage is given me at the thought that the God who uses the weakest means to fulfil His will, can use my best, but still very feeble, efforts to be His means to cause the devil to flee. Then, in my mission work, I do not need to restrict my witness to the less-than-worst sinners, but the Word of God can be presented to *all* with the assurance that God is able. Nor do I need to resort to tricks to make my witnessing have greater impact. You see, I believe in sovereign, irresistible grace!

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Calvinism rejoices in the truth that saving grace is irresistible! It might be better to call it 'effectual' or 'efficacious' grace. These words would avoid the idea that grace forces or compels – a possible implication of 'irresistible.' God's grace does not force one to be saved against his will, but grace changes one's will. Also, the use of 'effectual' instead of 'irresistible' avoids an apparent conflict. It would seem that 'irresistible' conflicts with Acts 7:51, where Stephen said that the Israelites "always resist the Holy Ghost."

When we speak of efficacious or irresistible grace, then, we are speaking of the internal operation of grace, not of the external means grace uses. Acts 7:51 speaks of the refusal to comply with the demands of the gospel to repent and believe. Stephen does not say that they resisted what God wanted to give them but, by killing the prophets, they rejected and rebelled against God's Word to repent. In this connection the Rev Robert C Harbach writes:

God is always Almighty God! Therefore they who did resist the Spirit, did *not* resist the Spirit in *them* for they were devoid of the Spirit. That resistance is to the Spirit in the prophets and in the ministers of the Lord; it is resistance to the external calls and reproofs through the preaching of the Word. But when the Spirit is in men in His grace... He thus makes them willing and turns them to Himself. "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power" (Psalm 110:3). (*Calvinism, the Truth*)

It is a truism that God does not save any man against his will. However, "it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (Romans 9:16).

Let every reader remember that all mankind is totally depraved that there is not one that doeth good, no not one (Romans 3:10–12). No human, of himself, has a desire for the true God (Job 21:14) or a desire to be saved. If God had left mankind in this terrible state to go to "everlasting punishment" (Matthew 25:46) it would have been most just and right. But God did not do so, for it pleased Him, before the foundation of the world, to choose in Jesus Christ some of mankind unto everlasting salvation to the

praise of the glory of His grace (Ephesians 1:4-6). The rest of mankind God chooses to leave in their sins to the praise of the glory of His power and wrath (Romans 9:22). For those whom God chose from eternity to be in Christ, God sent His Son, who died for their sins (Romans 5:8; 1Corinthians 15:3).

In the summary given in the previous paragraph everything follows an orderly fashion determined and controlled by an all-wise and all-powerful God. From this point forward, do we stop with God's powerful work and is everything left to the will and whim of sinful and fickle man? Can God elect some of mankind for nothing? Can God give His Son to die for nought, just because some are able to resist Him – resist Him whom the Scriptures call "the Almighty"? Are God's hands tied at this point? Is it possible that He could fail? Could it be that God is foolish enough not to have counted the cost before He started to build, so that He "is not able to finish it"? (Luke 14:28-29).

Are not such questions blasphemy? The God who determined salvation for His elect and gave His own Son to die in their place will "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). There is no reason to fear or doubt, for He *will save* His people! (Zechariah 8:7).

Grace is the favour and love of God. The power of grace is the power of the favour and love of God Himself. Therefore, it is fitting to speak of 'irresistible' grace, for God is an irresistible God. Does not the Holy Spirit inspire Paul to ask the rhetorical question, "Who hath resisted his will?" (Romans 9:19). If God's grace can be resisted then God can be overcome. If God's will and desires can be frustrated then He is not God. Such a God is no greater than the idols of the nations.

The church father Augustine said, "The nature of the Divine goodness is not only to open to those that knock but also *to cause* them to knock and ask." Our Reformed fathers in the *Canons of Dordt* properly and beautifully reflect Scripture when they draw a parallel between election and this dispensing of God's grace: "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 Son, that... they may glory not in themselves, but in the Lord" (III/IV: 10b). Note well: that the result is, as it must be, that God receives all the glory. In fact, earlier that same article speaks more clearly to this point. "But that others who are called by the gospel, obey the call, and are converted, is not to be ascribed to

the proper exercise of freewill whereby one distinguishes himself above others... as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains; but it must be wholly ascribed to God."

On the eve of the moment of His ascension to the right hand of power of the Almighty God, Jesus said, "*All power* is given unto *me* in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18). Before His "all power" none can stand. Listen to the Scriptures: of His sheep Jesus said, "Them also I *must bring*, and they *shall hear my voice*" (John 10:16). Notice that Jesus does not say He will try to bring them. After all, He suffered for sin, "that he might *bring us to God*" (1 Peter 3:18). "*No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day*" (John 6:44). He said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, *will draw all men unto me*" (John 12:32). He *will do it!* It is not that He will try to do it but that He will accomplish it. Because not every man is drawn to the Lord, the obvious implication is that Jesus is speaking of all *kinds* of men, all men without distinction of race, class or conditions. "*All that the Father hath given me shall come to me*" (John 6:37), every one of them come to Him – and nothing and no one can stop them coming to him. The sheep do hear His voice (John 10:16,27).

Another passage of the God's Word which clearly implies efficacious or irresistible grace is Acts 13:48, "As many as were ordained to eternal life believed." God's ordination unto election was an effectual act, because all that were ordained believed. In addition, God calls everyone whom He predestinated and every one of them He justifies (Romans 8:29–30). Jesus said that He "*gives eternal life to as many as*" the Father gave Him (John 17:2).

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Every man, by virtue of his relationship to Adam, is at enmity with God and "will not come to" Jesus (Romans 8:7; John 6:40). If God's grace is not effectual or irresistible, how could any man be saved?

That someone believes is not because he wanted to believe, nor is it because he began to strive to believe and so God helped him. Nor is it because he co-operated with God's grace, nor that he finally yielded to grace. But that anyone believes is because he has been regenerated by the sovereignly effectual, saving grace of God. The Spirit of God graciously gave faith and repentance. That anyone does not believe is because he has not been regenerated by this irresistible grace of God. The natural man does not receive

the things of the Holy Spirit, "for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1Corinthians 2:14).

The Spirit's effectual work of grace upon someone does not destroy his person, nor any of his faculties. Rather, the Spirit works through each elect's faculties. Listen to the language of the *Canons of Dordt*:

When God accomplishes his good pleasure in the elect, or works in them true conversion, he not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them, and powerfully illuminates their minds by his Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God; but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit, pervades the inmost recesses of the man: he opens the closed, and softens the hardened heart... infuses new qualities into the will, which though heretofore dead he quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory [stubborn, resistant], he renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions (III/IV:11).

Later these Reformed Fathers declare that the work of the Holy Spirit in the elect is truly supernatural, "not inferior in efficacy to creation, or the resurrection from the dead." Therefore, "all in whose heart God works are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated, and do actually believe" (*Canons III/IV:12*).

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The irresistible, efficacious nature of God's grace in saving the elect does not diminish the responsibility to preach the gospel in the established congregation or in the mission field. Nor does it diminish the earnest and serious proclamation of the gospel call to faith and repentance, together with the promise of salvation to all who believe. We have every reason to be encouraged in our proclamation of the gospel, because it is the means God is pleased to use to bring sinners into His kingdom.

We can be confident that the Spirit will effectually use the gospel proclamation to bring to salvation and keep in salvation. We have no reason to wonder, doubt, or fear about God's use of that preaching which proclaims God's Word. He will use it. Our evangelism and mission work can be performed in the confidence and assurance that God can and will call unto Himself whomsoever He will, and that He will use our faithful efforts to proclaim His truth to accomplish that end.

God's salvation is not mere potential but it is "the power of God" (Romans 1:16). The gospel does not proclaim a 'Divine possibility of salvation,' but it is 'Divine application of salvation.' God will, without fail, use the means of faithful preaching to draw all of His people unto Himself.