Irresistible Grace?

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The doctrine of Irresistible Grace is the fourth cardinal point in the Calvinistic theology. It is the "I" in the T-U-L-I-P acrostic. Irresistible Grace is also referred to as Special Grace or Efficacious Grace.

How the Calvinists Understand Irresistible Grace

Calvinists deny that Irresistible Grace is God forcing someone to come against his own will. Rather, say the Calvinists, Irresistible Grace makes the individual willing to come. Berkhof defined it thus: "By changing the heart it makes man perfectly willing to accept Jesus Christ unto salvation and to yield obedience to the will of God."

The Canons of Dort state that when God chooses an individual to be saved, He "powerfully illuminates their minds by His Holy Spirit; …. He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart; … He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it … this is regeneration … which God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated, and do actually believe."

John Calvin wrote about "the secret energy of the Spirit" and "the pure prompting of the Spirit." Calvin meant that the Holy Spirit would have to be sent to an individual to call him to salvation and once called he could not refuse. Calvin wrote, "As I have already said, it is certain that the mind of man is not changed for the better except by God's prevenient grace." Prevenient Grace is defined as "Divine grace that is said to

operate on the human will antecedent to its turning to God." In other words man's will is totally subservient to the irresistible call from God.

David Steele and Curtis Thomas state:

> *This special call is not made to all sinners but is issued to the elect only! The Spirit is in no way dependent upon their help or cooperation for success in His work of bringing them to Christ. It is for this reason that Calvinists speak of the Spirit's call and God's grace in saving sinners as being 'efficacious', 'invincible', or 'irresistible'. For the grace which the Holy Spirit extends to the elect cannot be thwarted or refused, it never fails to bring them to true faith in Christ!*

Paul Enns states:

> *In the logic of Calvinism, God, through His Spirit, draws precisely those whom God unconditionally elected from eternity past and Christ died for. Thus the purpose of God is accomplished. He elected certain ones, Christ died for those very ones, and now through the Holy Spirit, God dispenses His irresistible grace to them to make them willing to come. They do not want to resist.*

Billy Graham wrote:

> *Being born again is altogether a work of the Holy Spirit. There is nothing you can do to obtain this new birth …. In other words, there is nothing you can do about it … The new birth is wholly foreign to our will. – No man can ever be saved unless the Holy Spirit in supernatural, penetrating power comes and works upon your heart. You can't come to Christ any time you want to, you can only come when the Spirit of God is drawing and pulling and wooing.*

James Boyce believes that for man it is “impossible for him to be delivered by his own acts, even if he had the will to perform them.” Boyce believes that God did not choose the “elect” because He foresaw that these individuals would be good and pious people; he believes that it was because of God’s unconditional selective choosing of the elect that the elect or chosen ones are led to believe. Boyce takes the position that salvation is not dependent upon “the choice of the elect” but solely upon God’s choice.

Thomas Nettles denies that an individual can contribute to his own salvation. He believes that man’s faith does not come from man’s willingness to receive the word but “only from God’s sovereign bestowal.” He says, “The Holy Spirit moves in such a way as to create willingness in the form of repentance and faith.” He denies that the New Testament commandments of repentance and belief imply that man has it within his own power to repent and have faith.

W. J. Seaton wrote:

> *What is meant by irresistible grace? We know that when the gospel call goes out in a church, or in the open air, or through reading God’s Word, not everyone heeds that call. Not everyone becomes convinced of sin and his need of Christ. This explains the fact that there are two calls. There is not only an outward call; there is also an inward call. The outward call may be described as “words of the preacher”, and this call, when it goes forth, may work a score of different ways in a score of different hearts producing a score of different results. One thing it will not do, however; it will not work a work of salvation in a sinner’s soul. For a work of salvation to be wrought the outward call must be accompanied by the inward call of God’s Holy Spirit, for He it is who ‘convinces of sin, and righteousness, and judgment. And when the Holy Spirit calls a man, or a woman, or a young person by His grace, that call is irresistible: it cannot be frustrated; it is the manifestation of God’s irresistible*

> *grace.*

Loraine Boettner defines Irresistible Grace as:

> *God's free and special grace alone, not from any thing at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed by it.*

Man's Responsibility in the Salvation Process

Calvinism assumes that God has predetermined and foreordained certain ones to be saved, and that they cannot come to salvation until the Holy Spirit in a supernatural way works on the hearts of the elect. When the Holy Spirit calls the elect individual, he cannot resist. He has to respond, but he has to wait until the Holy Spirit calls him in some mysterious way. Also, if one is not one of the "elect," it will be impossible for him to be saved. Therefore, it is all the Holy Spirit's working. Man is a totally passive respondent in the salvation process, according to Calvinism, which denies that an individual can contribute to his own salvation.

In 1976, Robert Hudnut wrote the book Church Growth Is Not the Point. Hudnut is Calvinistic to the core. He writes,

> *We have been saved. It is not our doing. – No you don't even have to repent. Paul didn't. He was on his way to jail when it happened. He didn't do anything. – It is then we are driven to the passive action of repentance. You do not repent your way to God.*

Notice that Hudnut says repentance is passive. His theology is

corrupt. Man is told to repent in Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; and Revelation 2:16. In every verse cited, the Greek verb is in the active not the passive voice. Repentance is something man must do (Greek active voice); it is not what is done to him (Greek passive voice). There is not one case in the Bible of a person being passive while being saved. Even Paul was told what he "must do" (Acts 9:6). In Acts 2:38 repentance is tied to the remission of sins. If a man wants to be saved, then there is something he must do. Man does have a choice to make in his own salvation (Acts 2:40; Deut. 30:11-19; Joshua 24:15; Matt. 23:37; John 5:40). He must be involved. Without man's active role in the conversion process, he is lost.

The responsibility for man having an "honest and good heart" (Luke 8: 15), in order for the seed of the Kingdom to produce, lies with the person, not God. Man is told to "take heed how" he hears (Luke 8:18). The command in Luke 8:18 would be meaningless if man did not have a part in his own salvation. Why should one "take heed how" he hears if his salvation is a product of irresistible grace? Why "take heed" if the Holy Spirit is going to operate on the heart without a man's cooperation?

The Bible teaches man has a part to play in the salvation process. Notice these verses:

> *John 7:17, "If any man willeth to do his will"*
> *John 7:37, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink."*
> *John 12:26, "If any man serve me, let him follow me."*
> *John 12:47, If any man hear my sayings, and keep them not."*
> *Revelation 22:17, "He that is athirst, let him say, Come."*
> *Revelation 22:17, "He that will, let him take the water of life freely."*

The point of all these verses is that an individual must

“will” and “thirst” and “want to” come to the Lord. It is the responsibility of the individual to “will” – it is not God’s responsibility!

God creates “will” in any person with “an honest and good heart” through the preached word of the cross (John 12:32-33; 1 Cor. 1:18, 21; 2:2). The word is to be preached to everyone (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16). To hold God responsible for creating the right “will” in a person arbitrarily and unconditionally makes God a “respecter of persons.” This is something he is not (Acts 10:34-35; Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; 1 Pet. 1:17).

Is Faith Totally a Gift From God?

John Calvin wrote:

> *Faith is a singular gift of God, both in that the mind of man is purged so as to be able to taste the truth of God and in that his heart is established therein. – This is why Paul in another place commends faith to the elect (Titus 1:1) that no one may think that he acquires faith by his own effort but that his glory rests with God, freely to illumine whom he previously had chosen. – Faith – the illumination of God – Faith which he (i.e. God) put into our hearts – Our faith which arises not from the acumen of the human intellect but from the illumination of the Spirit alone – Faith flows from regeneration.*

Thomas Nettles wrote:

> *Faith is a gift of God and is bestowed gratuitously by him. – Neither justification nor faith comes from man’s willingness to receive but only from God’s sovereign bestowal. – Belief is still the result of the effectual call and regenerating power of God.*

Millard Erickson wrote: “Faith is God’s gift,” which refutes this Calvinistic mistake.

He wrote:

> *Is this Calvinistic view that faith is totally the gift of God correct? No! Does an individual have to wait for the Holy Spirit to come in some secret way to infuse faith? No! There are several reasons:*
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> *For God to give certain people faith arbitrarily makes God a respecter of persons. The Bible is emphatic that “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34-35; Rom. 2:11, 10:12; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; 1 Pet. 1:17). Salvation depends upon man exercising his freedom of will. If salvation depends totally upon the Holy Spirit and a man is lost, that man can blame God. But, that will not happen because the Lord has done his part; man must do his.*
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> *Faith comes through the hearing of the word of God not through some secret mysterious sending by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 10:17; Luke 8:11-12; John 6:44-45; 20:30-31; Acts 4:4; 8:12; 15:7; 18:8; 20:32; Eph. 1:13). None of these verses indicate faith coming through a supernatural calling. Faith comes as we hear and study the evidence and then we ourselves decide to believe.*
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> *Faith is our part in the salvation process (1 John 5:4; Rev. 2:10). We have a responsibility to save ourselves (Acts 2:40) and to build our faith Jude 20; Acts 20:32). This is something we must do. Passages like Hebrews 11:6 are meaningless if the Holy Spirit is going to miraculously infuse faith. Jesus said, “Ye must be born anew” John 3:7). The word “must” is in the active voice indicating we have a part to play in our salvation. We are not totally passive in the salvation process. Our active obedient faith is necessary for us to be saved (Heb. 5:9; 2 Thess. 1:8; John 3:36; Rom. 6:17-18; James 2:24-26).*

God purifies the heart by faith (Acts 15:9). Calvinists have the heart purified before faith. Alexander Campbell said, "Why do we preach the gospel to convert men, if, before they believe the gospel, and without the gospel, men are renewed and regenerated by the direct and immediate influence of God's Spirit?" Good question!

Calvinists teach that "spiritual darkness" refers to man's depraved condition and that God has to perform supernatural secret surgery by the Holy Spirit in order to bring men into "spiritual light." But, in Acts 26:16-18, Paul was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles to "open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God." A careful study of the book of Acts reveals that the early Christians depended upon the word of God to change the hearts of sinners and produce faith. Nowhere in the book of Acts do we find someone being converted by a direct operation of the Holy Spirit.

One is never so "spiritually dead" that he cannot hear and understand and believe the word of God in order to have faith (Eph. 5:14; John 5:25; 12:42-43). The rulers of the Jews "believed on" Jesus but would not confess him. Did they believe? Yes! Their problem was a "want to" problem not that they were so spiritually dead they could not understand. Calvinists misunderstand 1 Corinthians 2:14. The "natural man" of 1 Cor. 2:14 is the man who does not care about spiritual things – not the man who cannot understand them. Calvinists say the unsaved man cannot understand spiritual truth. Wrong! The rulers of the Jews, who were unsaved, in John 12:42-43 understood the truth exactly. They just "did not want to" obey the Lord. Wayne Grudem, and Ralph Gore, and Millard Erickson, who are Calvinists, do not even discuss John 12:42-43.

Dr. John Warwick Montgomery, a professor at Trinity Theological Seminary in Newburgh, Indiana – a Calvinistic school – believes that Ephesians 2:8 teaches that faith is a

> *direct gift from God and that man cannot do anything himself to get faith. The apostle Paul said in Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." After quoting this verse Montgomery said,*
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> *Don't get the idea that you did it. You didn't do it. Faith is the gift of God. The word 'that' in Ephesians 2:8 refers to 'faith' because 'faith' is the closest antecedent to the word ' that.' Once a person is saved, he cannot properly accredit that to anything but the Holy Spirit.*

Faith is, in one sense, a gift of God because God has given us the Word which produces faith. Without the Word, we could not have faith. But, the entire Bible and especially Ephesians 2:8 do not teach that faith is a direct gift of God in which we have no part. The word "that" in Ephesians 2:8 refers to the salvation process. The salvation process is "the gift of God." We are saved "by grace through faith" which is the salvation process. But, this does not mean we have earned our salvation. We cannot boast of our salvation as if we have worked for it and earned it (Eph. 2:9). Jesus said even after we have done all that we are commanded to do we are to say, "We are unprofitable servants we have done that which is our duty to do" (Luke 17:10). James said, "Faith apart from works is dead" James 2:26).

Verses Misused by Calvinists to Support Irresistible Grace

John 6:37: "All that which the Father giveth me shall come unto me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."

WJ. Seaton said: "Note that it is those whom the Father has given to Christ -the elect- that shall come to Him; and when

they come to Him they will not be cast out."

Response: (1) All those with a submissive spirit will come to Christ. These are the ones whom the Father gives to Jesus and not one of these will he refuse (cf. John 10:26-29 where the verbs "hear" and "follow" are continuous action). One must come with a willing heart John 5:40; 7:17; Matt. 13:9; Rev. 22:17). (2) There is nothing here or in God's word that teaches that God arbitrarily chooses those who come to Christ. Jesus uses truth and love to persuade men to accept him John 12:32-33, 48; 2 Cor. 5:14-15). Calvinists are reading into the text an arbitrary decree that is not there! (3) The gospel is for all (Mark 16:15-16), but not all men will accept it (2 Thess. 1:7-10). Those who refuse to accept Christ do so because of their own willful rejection (Matt. 13:14-15; 23:37)- not because of some arbitrary decree. Paul Butler says, "Man's rejection by God is caused by man's rejection of God." (4) Jesus said, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matt. 11:15). Jesus did not say, "The Holy Spirit will supernaturally open your hearts so you can believe." In Matthew 11:15 Jesus was teaching that man has a responsibility to have an "honest and good heart." That is not the work of the Holy Spirit. If a man does not have an "honest and good heart," he cannot and will not come to Jesus. (5) In context John 6:40 explains John 6:37 and 39. It explains who the Father has given unto Jesus: Those who "beholdeth" and "believeth" on the Son! Both of these verbs are present tense verbs indicating continuous action. Those who continue to behold and believe on the Son are the ones whom the Father has given unto Jesus. It is our own individual free-will responsibility to continue to believe. We are not forced or coerced against our will.

John 6:44: "No man can come to me, except the Father that sent me draw him: and I will raise him up in the last day."

John Calvin said: "But nothing is accomplished by preaching him if the Spirit, as our inner teacher, does not show our

minds the way. Only those men, therefore, who have heard and have been taught by the Father come to him. What kind of learning and hearing is this? Surely, where the Spirit by a wonderful and singular power forms our ears to hear and our minds to understand."

W.J. Seaton said: "Here our Lord is simply saying that it is impossible for men to come to Him of themselves; the Father must draw them."

Response: (1) Calvin assumes the drawing is a miraculous operation. We base truth on clear biblical teaching – not assumptions. (2) The next verse explains how God does the drawing and it is not miraculous. It is written that one must be taught (Jer. 31:31-34; Isa. 54:13). One must hear and one must learn! This is not miraculous! God draws men through teaching. "Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). The book of Acts is proof positive that Christianity is a taught religion – not a caught religion in the sense that the Holy Spirit must convert a man separate and apart from the word of God. The means and the method the Father uses to draw men is the preached word (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Acts 4:4; 8:4, 12; 11:26; 15:7; 18:8; 20:20; 1 Cor. 1:18-21; 2:1-4; Col. 2:7; 2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Tim. 2:2; etc.). (3) Why did our Lord invite all men to come to him if he knew that it was impossible for some of them to come (Matt. 11:28)? That does not make sense. (4) Guy N. Woods said: "Some are not drawn, because they do not will to do so; it has been well said. that a magnet draws iron, but not all objects are drawn by magnets, because all are not iron! Similarly, one must be of the right disposition and have the proper response to the drawing power of the Father which he exercises through the gospel." (5) John 12:32-33 also teaches we are drawn to the Lord through Christ's death on the cross. Some appreciate his death, and sadly, some do not.

Acts 16:14: "And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, one that worshipped God,

heard us: whose heart the Lord opened to give heed unto the things which were spoken by Paul."

John Calvin said:

> *Indeed, it does not so stand in man's own impulse, and consequently even the pious and those who fear God still have need of the especial prompting of the Spirit. Lydia, the seller of purple, feared God, yet her heart had to be opened to receive Paul's teaching (Acts 16:14) and to profit by it. This was said not of one woman only but to teach us that the advancement of every man in godliness is the secret work of the Spirit.*

Charles Hodge said:

> *The truth is compared to light, which is absolutely necessary· to vision; but if the eye be closed or blind it must be opened or restored before the light can produce its proper impression." Hodge tries to use the case of Lydia as proof of the direct operation of the Holy Spirit in conversion.*

W. 1. Seaton said:

> *One outstanding illustration of this teaching of irresistible grace, or effectual calling, is certainly the incident that we read in Acts 16. The apostle Paul preaches the gospel to a group of women by the riverside at Philippi; and as he does so, 'a certain woman named Lydia heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things that were spoken of Paul.' Paul, the preacher, spoke to Lydia's ear – the outward call; but the Lord spoke to Lydia's heart – the inward call of irresistible grace.*

Response: (1) Calvin's admission that Lydia "feared" God before God "opened" her heart destroys his teaching of Total

Depravity. (2) It is a complete assumption that God opened her heart by a direct secret operation of the Holy Spirit. The text does not tell us what Calvin believes. Calvin gives us a classic case of eisegesis – i.e. reading into the text what is not there. (3) The word "heart" is used figuratively. Consider: John 12:40; Matthew 9:4; 13:15; Mark 2:6; and Romans 10:10. The word "opened" is evidently used figuratively – i.e. to expand or broaden the mind. Luke 24:45 states, "Then opened he their mind." Jesus "opened" the mind of the apostles by explaining the Scriptures to them not by a direct operation of the Holy Spirit. The word "opened" was simply a way of saying that the person came to an understanding of, and a belief in, the message under consideration. It is analogous to Paul's statement in Ephesians 1:18, "having the eyes of your heart enlightened." (4) Acts 16:14 indicates that the Lord opened her heart through the things which were spoken by Paul. The Spirit's work in conversion is not something done directly upon the heart apart from the preached Word. (5) J.W. McGarvey said, "The assumption, therefore, that her heart was opened by an abstract influence of the Spirit, is entirely gratuitous and illogical, while the real cause is patent upon the face of the narrative in the preaching done by Paul." (6) Dr. Richard Oster said, "It is significant that this opening of the heart came only after she had heard what was said by Paul. Perhaps the method of opening her heart was the preached word (cf. Luke 24:45)." (7) The word "heard" is an imperfect tense verb which means continuous action in the past. Lydia kept on hearing Paul. The hearing occurred before the opening of the heart. Wayne Jackson states, "The implication here is the exact opposite of that demanded by Calvinism. That doctrine alleges that one cannot give honest attention to the Word of God until the Lord first opens the heart, but this passage actually demonstrates otherwise. She kept on listening and thereby her heart (understanding) was opened by God!" (8) The words "give heed" implies that Lydia had a choice in her obedience. Study: Acts 8:6-12; 20:28; Luke 8:18 and Hebrews 2:1-2. (9) There are many passages which demonstrate that God,

as a general rule, works through means and not directly (2 Kings 5:1-14; Matt. 6:11; 2 Cor. 9:10).

Romans 10:16-17: “But they did not all hearken to the glad tidings. For Isaiah with, Lord, who hath believed our report? So belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” John Calvin said, “To whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed. – By this, he means that only when God shines in us by the light of His Spirit is there any profit from the word. Thus the inward calling, which alone is effectual and peculiar to the elect is distinguished from the outward voice of men.”

Calvin believed that the Word of God could only produce faith in a heart of one already illumined by the Spirit of God. In commenting on Romans 10:17, Calvin admits that when Paul makes “hearing the beginning of faith he is describing only the ordinary arrangement and dispensation of the Lord which he commonly uses in calling his people – not, indeed, prescribing for him an unvarying rule so that he may use no other way.”

Response: (1) Calvin assumes his doctrine of total depravity is true. He insists they did not believe because they could not believe. The text does not say what Calvin believed. (2) If one must be regenerated before he can hear, then he is regenerated before he has faith. This contradicts many Bible passages (John 8:24; Acts 11:14; 16:14; Rom. 1:17; 5:1; Gal. 3:11). (3) Personal responsibility is definitely set forth in this verse. If anyone does not believe, it is because he does not “hearken” to the message preached – not because of inherited total depravity. Notice the parallel between “hearken” and “believed” with “glad tidings” – i.e. the gospel and “report.” To have a saving faith is to hearken – i.e. hear and obey. (4) Every case of conversion in the Bible involved a teaching situation. Christianity is a taught religion (John 6:45; Acts 4:4; 8:4; 11:26; 18:8; 20:20; Col. 2:7; 2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Tim. 2:2). There is no example in the Bible where the Holy Spirit supernaturally infused faith into an individual. A saving faith comes when an honest and good heart is taught

truth found in the word of God and then that truth is accepted and appreciated and appropriated.

Conclusion

There is not one passage in the entire Bible which directly or indirectly teaches Calvinism’s doctrine of Irresistible Grace. In fact, it contradicts God’s word. Calvinism would make God a “respecter of persons.” But, the Bible says He is not! It is God’s will for all men to be saved; therefore, salvation is conditioned only on man’s will. God is always willing for all men to be saved. Calvinism is false doctrine. Let us follow the truth in God’s word and reject the false doctrine of Calvinism!

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