

Grace Changes Everything

Part 6 – Irresistible Grace

Total Depravity

Unconditional Election

Limited Atonement

Irresistible Grace

Perseverance of the Saints

A Theology of Gratitude

The doctrines of grace cultivate humility and gratitude. As Ian Hamilton has observed, “A biblical belief in the sovereignty of God smashes, not cultivates, human pride.”¹ He continues:

“Calvinism challenges the residual pride in human hearts. We are naturally and natively far more comfortable with Arminianism, which allows us to make a contribution to our salvation. To be confronted by the truth of our total inability is deeply humbling, but it is the truth of God’s own Word, not a notion that John Calvin concocted in Geneva. Becoming persuaded of this and casting ourselves solely on God’s mercy in Christ knocks the pride out of us and teaches us to live as men and women who glory in the God of grace. This is simply another way of saying that Calvinism puts God where he belongs and puts us where we belong.”²



Effectual Calling in Scripture

“Jesus answered them, ‘I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.’” (John 10:25-30)

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:37-40)

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:44)

“‘But there are some of you who do not believe.’ (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, ‘This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.’” (John 6:64-65)

“And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.” (Acts 13:48)

“One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” (Acts 16:14)

¹ Ian Hamilton, “Winsome Calvinism,” *The Banner of Truth* 526 (2007): 4.

² Ibid. 5

“And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” (Romans 8:30)

“For many are called but few are chosen.” (Matthew 22:14)

Effectual Calling Defined

Irresistible Grace, or *Effectual Calling* is God's powerful and ultimately persuasive summons to the elect such that He overcomes their sinful wills and grants spiritual life thus enabling repentance from sin and faith in Jesus. The doctrines of grace give proper acknowledgment to the fact that from start to finish, the work of salvation is a Trinitarian accomplishment. “What the Father decrees, the Son accomplishes, and the Spirit applies.” Effectual calling (connected to regeneration) is the Holy Spirit's work of applying the work of Christ in redemption by overcoming the stubborn will of the sinner and granting new life.

Westminster Confession of Faith

10.1 – All those whom God hath predestinated 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.

10.2 – 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 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.

The Baptist Faith and Message

4.A – Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace.

“Simply stated, this doctrine asserts that the Holy Spirit never fails to bring to salvation those sinners whom he personally calls to Christ. He inevitably applies salvation to every sinner whom he intends to save, and it is his intention to save all the elect.”³

Human Inability, Regeneration, and Effectual Calling

Why must God's electing, saving grace be ultimately irresistible? Why must his saving call be effectual?

We will not comprehend Effectual Calling (or unconditional election or perseverance of the saints, for that matter) if we do not understand the doctrine of Total Depravity. As we saw in the earlier lesson, Total Depravity issues in the sinner's inability and unwillingness to choose in favor of God (1 Cor. 2:14). So bound over to sin is the will of everyone outside of Christ that the Scriptures rightly refer to the lost as slaves to sin. Or what of Paul's words that outside of Christ we are “dead in sins and trespasses” (Eph. 2:1)? If God's electing grace were not effectual, overcoming the sinner's stubborn will, then no sinner would ever be saved.

The Canons of Dort states: Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil,¹ dead in sin,² and in bondage thereto;³ and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit,⁴ they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, or to dispose themselves to reformation.⁴

¹ Gen 6:5; ² Eph 2:1, ³ Jn 8:34; Rom 6:16-17; ⁴ Jn 3:3-6; Titus 3:5

³Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004) p. 52

⁴ *Canons of Dort*, “The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine” article 3

Effectual Calling is coextensive with the Spirit's work of regeneration or the new birth. That is, we cannot separate the Holy Spirit's effectual call from his work of regeneration. When the Holy Spirit effectually calls a sinner to believe, he also grants him new birth which enables the sinner to repent and believe. "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...His will is renewed through this process, so that the sinner spontaneously comes to Christ of his own free choice."⁵

"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood *nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*" (John 1:12-13)

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:6-8)

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:44)

"All that the Father gives me will come to me..." (John 6:37)

"For many are called but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:14)

"...and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." (Acts 13:48)

"The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." (Acts 16:14)

"The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit Who was given to us." (Rom.5:5)

"He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but *according to his own mercy*, by the washing of *regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.*" (Titus 3:5)

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him." (1 John 5:1)

Synergistic Regeneration

Synergism is cooperative. The Arminian doctrine of synergistic regeneration holds that man cooperates with God in his regeneration. In other words, Arminianism holds that the new birth is God's gracious response to man's act of believing.

Monergistic Regeneration

As the word suggests, monergism is due to the act of one party. The doctrine of monergistic regeneration holds that regeneration or the new birth is entirely the sovereign and gracious work of God. "It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."⁶

- "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:6-8)
- "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." (Acts 16:14)

The faith to believe is itself a gift of God's grace. *Dort* states: "Faith is therefore to be considered as the gift of God,¹ not on account of its being offered by God to man, to be accepted or rejected at his pleasure, but because it is in reality conferred upon him, breathed and infused into him; nor even because God bestows the power or ability to believe, and then expects that man should by the exercise of his own free will consent

⁵ Ibid, p. 53

⁶ *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, article 4.1

to the terms of salvation and actually believe in Christ, but because He who works in man both to will and to do,² works in man both to will and to believe, and indeed He works all in all.”⁷

¹ Eph 2:8; ² Phil 2:13

“In birth a baby is completely helpless. He does not make himself. He is made. He is born. There is complete passivity on his part. Obviously a baby could not have said to his parents before he was born, “I determine that I shall now be born.” And so it is in the case of a spiritual birth. That which is not yet born cannot say, “I will to be born.” That which is dead spiritually cannot say, “I will to live.” And that which has not yet been created can never say, “I will to be created.” These are manifest impossibilities. Rather, as in the case of a baby, or creation yet to be, or a dead man, spiritual birth, creation, or life comes wholly at the discretion of the Holy Spirit. It is he who does the deciding, and not man. Man is entirely passive. The Holy Spirit is entirely sovereign, regenerating exactly whom he wills. Consequently, John could say that the children of God are “born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:13).”⁸

Common Objections

1. Were those who believe forced against their will?

The doctrine of effectual calling is sometimes charged with being nothing better than manipulation. Comparisons are drawn with brainwashing, or the application of mechanical force, or (more recently) of being ‘programmed’, or other types of coercion. Those who think of divine-human relations in the exclusively cooperative patterns typical of much modern theology cannot consistently find a place for effectual calling as biblically understood.

As the *Westminster Confession of Faith* states, those who respond to God’s effectual call ‘come most freely, being made willing by his grace’. The tailoring of the divine activity to the uniqueness of the total life situation of each recipient. There is warrant for this from the New Testament’s evidence of the variety of ‘callings’ such as that of Nathanael and Lydia and Paul and Zaccheus.

Incidentally, we should not conclude that the work of effectual calling is always free from force (as in the conversion of Saul or Tarsus, for example). Typically however it is more gentle (as, perhaps, in the case of Nathanael, and Lydia of Thyatira). The change may even, in its first conscious beginnings, be unnoticed.

2. Doesn’t the Bible record people resisting or rejecting God’s grace?

Yes. Indeed, people reject God’s grace regularly. The Bible presents numerous examples of this sad pattern of sinners rejecting God’s grace. In the New Testament there are examples of people rejecting the call of Jesus and the apostles to believe. Do these examples undermine the doctrine of effectual calling? Not at all because there is a distinction between a general call and God’s effectual call. There is a general call that goes out to all the world to repent and believe. This is distinct from the regenerating and effectual call of the Holy Spirit which is applied to the elect. The Apostle Paul’s conversion is an example of this, albeit quite dramatic. As Jesus stated, “For many are called but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:14).

3. What about the commands in Scripture for sinners to repent and believe?

Why would God command all people to repent and believe if only the elect receive the Spirit’s effectual call?

Remember, that we must interpret Scripture with Scripture. We must keep in mind what the Bible tells us about the pervasiveness of sin, about man’s inability, and that a sinner’s will is not free but enslaved to sin. It is true that God calls sinners to repent and to believe in Jesus. But this does not automatically imply that sinners have in themselves the ability or the will to do so apart from the direct gracious intervention of God. Scripture makes clear that sinners have no hope to turn from their sin and believe in Jesus apart from the new birth and sovereign call of God.

⁷ *Canons of Dort*, The Third and Fourth Points of Doctrine, article 14

⁸ Edwin H. Palmer, *The Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit: The Traditional Calvinistic Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1974), 77-86

4. Doesn't the doctrine of effectual calling undermine evangelism?

If the Spirit is going to irresistibly call sinners to himself then the church has no need to evangelize.

This objection falls to the ground once we consider that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign over both ends and means. He has determined to use the church's witness as the chief means by which he calls sinners to himself (Romans 10:14-17). So rather than undermining our witness, effectual calling is the guarantee that our witness will never be in vain but will be used by God to accomplish his saving ends.

Gratitude for Grace

The Canons of Dort connect the dots between God's effectual calling and the believer's gratitude. In "The First Main Point of Doctrine," articles 3, 4, and 7 Dort argues that the sinner's eyes are opened to the gospel due to the free mercy of God and not because of any virtue or ability in man:

Article 3: And that men may be brought to believe, God mercifully sends the messengers of these most joyful tidings¹ to whom He will and at what time He pleases; by whose ministry men are called to repentance and faith in Christ crucified.² "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they are sent?" (Rom 10:14-15).

¹ Isa 52:7; Rom 10:14-17; ² I Cor 1:23-24

Article 4: The wrath of God abides upon those who believe not this gospel.¹ But such as receive it² and embrace Jesus the Savior by a true and living faith³ are by Him delivered from the wrath of God and from destruction, and have the gift of eternal life conferred upon them.⁴

¹ Jn 3:36; Rom 1:18, 2:5; ² Jn 1:12-13; ³ HC 21 ⁴ Rom 10:9

Article 7: Election is the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world,¹ He has out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will,² chosen from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault from their primitive state of uprightness into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, whom He from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect and the foundation of salvation. This elect number, though by nature neither better nor more deserving than others, but with them involved in one common misery, God has decreed to give to Christ to be saved by Him,³ and effectually to call⁴ and draw them⁵ to His communion by His Word and Spirit; to bestow upon them true faith, justification, and sanctification; and having powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of His Son,⁶ finally to glorify them⁷ for the demonstration of His mercy, and for the praise of the riches of His glorious grace; as it is written: "Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him, in love having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He bestowed grace upon us in the Beloved" (Eph 1:4-6). And elsewhere: "Whom He predestined, these He also called, and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Rom 8:30).

¹ Eph 1:4; ² Eph 1:11; ³ Jn 17:2; ⁴ 1 Cor 1:9; ⁵ Jn 6:37, 44; ⁶ Jn 17:12; ⁷ Jn 17:24

"Why the gospel is made effective in some and not in others is not due to one man's ability to use the light of nature better than another nor is it due to any intrinsic worth in one man that makes him more worthy than another. To the contrary, it is due to 'the free good pleasure and undeserved love of God.' What then should the attitude of those who receive this grace be? Dort answers, 'those who receive so much grace, beyond and in spite of all they deserve, ought to acknowledge it with humble and thankful hearts.'"⁹

⁹ Matthew Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness* (Ontario: Joshua Press, 2013) p. 92