

Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Theology/Doctrine

Irresistible Grace: The Effectual Call of God

Understanding Irresistible Grace

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There is no reasonable answer, humanly speaking, that explains why I am a Christ-follower. I was not born into a religious home nor was I educated in the ways of Christianity. My father—a hardened atheist for most of his life—made no secret of his disdain for organized religion. Likewise, my mother, although raised by nominally religious parents, showed little interest in matters of a spiritual sort. My childhood was predominately secular. I had few, if any, religious friends and I certainly had no interest in being religious myself. What little I did know about Christianity, in retrospect, was ascertained mostly from Christmas carols, Easter plays, or the occasional religious movie. Yet here I am today; a middle-aged evangelical—and a pastor no less—approaching my fourth decade in the Christian faith.

How is such a thing possible?

My story is really not that much different from every other sinner throughout history who has come to personally know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. We each have testimonials which, in their own unique way, defy the odds. By all accounts, we are statistical anomalies. There is no logical basis for why any idolater of sin would ever willingly forsake his gratuitous idols for a life of righteousness. So this begs the question further: How is salvation possible? How do hardened pagans ever come to revere the God they inherently revile?

The Bible does not leave us without an answer. It tells us that the miracle of conversion is accomplished by the gracious and efficacious work of the Holy Spirit. Without His leading, no sinner would ever come to God. Without His work, no sinner could ever be born-again. Without His influence, no sinner would ever find Christ palatable. The Spirit calls and drags; He makes known and reveals; He regenerates and sanctifies; and He quickens and convicts. And He does so irresistibly and powerfully. Even the most obstinate sinner, vile and rebellious though he may be, is powerless to thwart the inward summons of the Holy Spirit. Consider, for example, the conversion story of one of the most wicked men to ever grace the pages of Church history—John Newton.

Newton was born in London, England on July 24, 1725. The son of a religious mother and an overbearing father with a penchant for drink, Newton took to seafaring when he was only eleven years-old. But a cantankerous relationship with his father (who was also the ship's commander), the brutal living conditions aboard the vessel, and the resentment of his shipmates made life on the high seas miserable for young Newton. Before long, disillusionment and despondency were his only friends.

After Newton broke from his father a few years later and entered the Royal Navy, his despondency morphed into pessimism. A chance reading of *Characteristics of Men* by Lord Shaftesbury had a profound impact on his worldview, particularly concerning religious matters. The book—which was written by a philosophical naturalist—coursed through Newton’s impressionable veins like a slow poison, killing off his religious inclinations one by one. In ode to Shaftesbury, Newton came to pride himself on his religious skepticism. But what began as honest doubts soon metastasized into militant extremism. He not only convinced himself that uncertainty about God, even rank unbelief, was a staple characteristic of intellectual integrity but viewed organized religion as something to be opposed.

Newton’s newfound poison opened up new vistas of intellectual freedom. Yet such freedom was only illusory as he found himself only further enslaved by his sin. Bolstered by a sailor’s vulgar tongue, he considered it trivial to degrade the name of Jesus Christ. “Instead of prayer,” he later recalled, “I learned to curse and blaspheme.”¹

Newton’s reputation preceded him almost everywhere he went. His heart hardened to such a degree that he was known as the vilest sailor on the North Atlantic, surpassing all others in conduct unbecoming of a gentleman. On those rare occasions when his ship was at port, he made it his ambition to carouse at night, often drinking, fighting, and womanizing until daybreak. He was careless, insubordinate, foul-mouthed and no respecter of morality. In the words of one of his biographers, John Newton “plumbed the depths of human sin and degradation.”² Newton himself later admitted: “I saw the necessity of religion as a means of escaping hell, but I loved sin and was unwilling to forsake it.”³

Not satisfied with his own debauchery, Newton was complicit in the moral downfall of others. He took pleasure in luring impressionable sailors into his colorful lifestyle—baiting them, as it were, with forbidden fruit—and, in a very real sense, making degenerates out of them. Years later he confessed: “... abandoned as I pleased, without any controul; and, from this time, I was exceedingly vile ... I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others upon every occasion.”⁴

Growing more belligerent with each passing month, Newton perfected his knack for sacrilege. It seems he was especially talented at writing limericks of a blasphemous nature. Beyond the usual profanity native to salty seamen, he crafted a string of vulgarities that raged against the very concept of God. He made no secret of his hobby:

I had no business to employ my thoughts ... my whole life, when awake, was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness. I know not that I have ever since met so daring a blasphemer. Not content with common oaths and imprecations, I daily invented new ones.⁵

Things only spiraled downhill for Newton as time went on. In 1744, at the age of nineteen, he had fallen victim to unrequited love. Mary Catlett, with whom he had been in love since childhood, rebuffed his advances. Moved to despair, he jumped ship and deserted his post. Within days he was captured and returned to the boat, not as a midshipman, but as a felon to await punishment. He was confined below deck and placed in chains. In the foul, dank basement of the ship he was left alone to contemplate

his unknown fate. The reproach he felt from his shipmates—his fellow disciples of degeneracy no less!—brought him to the brink of lunacy. He burned with murderous hatred.

Two days later, the morning before his ship was to shove off to India, the entire crew assembled on deck to witness Newton's court-martial and flogging. Stripped of rank and his dignity, he was verbally accosted, publicly humiliated, and reportedly given eight dozen strokes from a cat-o'-nine-tails. Lash after lash, crack after crack, came whipping down on his naked back.

There is no doubt that the shame Newton felt during his tribunal dramatically affected his disposition. Rather than reform his ways, however, he sank deeper into dissipation. He went from morally repugnant to morally un-redeemable; from a blasphemous skeptic to a neurotic atheist. Filled with rage, he contemplated murdering the ship's captain and then committing suicide by throwing himself overboard. But sober judgment eventually prevailed, preventing him from acting on his desperate impulses.

Newton's record in the Royal Navy was permanently marred by his court-martial. Fully aware of his bleak future, he negotiated his discharge from service, insisting upon an immediate transfer. His captain was more than happy to oblige him, grateful to finally rid himself of his insubordinate menace.

Nineteen days later, Newton was exchanged into service on the *Pegasus*, a merchant ship bound for Africa. Although he had no idea as to the type of goods and services trafficked on the boat, Newton preferred the year-long voyage to Africa on the merchant ship to the navy's five-year voyage to India. He accepted his new assignment with a smile on his face. Aboard the *Pegasus*, John Newton was amongst strangers who knew nothing of his raucous past or his desertion and flogging. A new career awaited him.

It wasn't until he assumed his position as deckhand on the vessel that Newton realized that his new skipper and crew were engaged in the slave trade between Africa and the West Indies. But such a morally repugnant line of work mattered little to Newton. If there was a dollar to be had, he reasoned, then, by any means necessary, a dollar should be gained. With Sierra Leone the next stop on the voyage, the *Pegasus* set sail for Africa and, in so doing, set out a new career for Newton.

By the time he turned twenty-three, Newton had advanced up the chain of command. He eventually reached the rank of captain (although not without trial and tribulation) and was given his own slave ship to ply his trade. Before long he became a leading slave trader in the industry, pedaling captured slaves between Africa, England, and the Americas.

Newton succeeded where many budding entrepreneurs had failed. Through bribery and manipulation, he developed working relationships with African tribal chiefs who, for a pittance, did his bidding. The ingenious chiefs kidnapped rival tribesmen, bound them had and foot in chains, and brought them to Newton for bartering. Other natives were baited by the crew, lured to Newton's ship by European trinkets. They came from far and wide to behold western craftsmanship only to then be subdued and incarcerated in the orlop of the boat.

Newton was in the depths of sin. He had abandoned his belief in God. He had forsaken a life of morality. And he had grown wealthy and comfortable tyrannizing

people of color. But his life of satisfaction was short-lived. At the height of his depravity, while sailing across the North Atlantic, he came across a copy of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471). With skeptical trepidation, he decided to read it. The words of Kempis haunted him immediately, particularly the following passage:

Since life is of short and of uncertain continuance, it highly concerns you to look about you and take good heed how you employ it. O hardness of men's hearts! O the wretched stupidity that fixes their whole thoughts and cares upon the present ... whereas in truth, every work and word, and thought, ought to be so ordered as if it were to be our last; and we instantly to die, and render an account of it.⁶

Render an account for our lives, work, and thoughts? Newton mused: "What if these things should be true!"⁷ Alarmed by the words and his own reaction to them, he angrily threw the book aside. He was an intellectual—a skeptic at best and an atheist at worst—and he was determined to live with the consequences. Nevertheless, as he later wrote, "... the Lord's time was come, and the conviction I was so unwilling to receive was deeply impressed upon me by an awful dispensation."⁸

The spiritual conviction Newton felt when reading *The Imitation of Christ* soon ballooned into outright desperation. The next night, on March 10, 1748, the crew was suddenly jolted awake as a violent storm descended upon them. Wave after wave pounded the vessel smashing the planking, tearing the rigging, and filling the hold with water. The pumps could not keep up with the rising water and Newton joined his fellow mariners in the hopeless task of funneling seawater off the boat. Hour after hour they battled the foaming waves and blustery gales. Some crewmembers were washed overboard in the torrent along with livestock and much of the cargo. All hope for survival fast disappeared.

The rigging of the boat was badly damaged and many of the sails were in tatters. The boat's nautical location was lost on the map and food rations were in short supply. Newton's mind was racing. Although he couldn't understand what was happening, he suddenly felt that he was not alone. The presence of something or *someone* overcame him. At the same time, convinced that his sins were too great to be forgiven, his trained memory recalled to mind the many terrifying Scriptures learned in childhood that condemned him. Such recollections only amplified his fear. Day after day, as the ship continued to negotiate through the stormy weather, he took his turn at the helm of the battered boat, sometimes for eleven hours at a time, steering the frail ship through the mountainous waves. All the while he re-examined his beliefs and, in extreme anxiety, pondered the Scriptures that haunted him.

For almost a month the boat drifted aimlessly. Newton recorded in his journal that when all seemed lost and the ship was sure to sink, he made a surprising distress call: "Lord, have mercy upon us." Those words, borne from intense desperation, joggled him. *Lord, have mercy on us?* How could such a plea come from the mouth of a notorious blasphemer? Even more surprising to Newton was the eventual reality that his prayer did not go unanswered. The damaged ship miraculously reached port on the northern shores of Ireland. The boat was saved and the lives of its starving crew spared.

Afterwards, Newton reflected long and hard on all that had happened. Were the treacherous events at sea meant for a greater purpose? Was he delivered from the brink of death and a watery grave for a reason? Later in his cabin he re-read what he wrote in his journal—“*Lord, have mercy on us*”—and was convinced that God had addressed him through the storm. To him, it was no longer a question of ‘*Is there a God?*’ but ‘*What is God like? How may I truly know Him?*’ and ‘*Is there still forgiveness to be had?*’ He felt grace begin to work in his heart. Convinced that God’s providence was responsible for his survival, he abandoned his doubt and pride. Yet Newton was baffled as to why God counted him worthy of such mercy, especially in light of his belligerent heart, countless blasphemies, and the many perversions committed in his past. Why would God save a wretch like him?

By the end of his stay in Ireland, Newton was a beaten man. He renounced his life of debauchery and publicly professed his faith in Jesus Christ. In his own words, he became “a serious professor” of the Savior. He later wrote:

I stood in need of an Almighty Saviour, and such a one I found described in the New Testament. The Lord had wrought a marvelous thing: I was no longer an infidel. I heartily renounced my former profaneness, I had taken up some right notions, was seriously disposed, and sincerely touched with a sense of the undeserved mercy in being brought safely through so many dangers; I was sorry for my past misspent life, and purposed an immediate reformation ... I cannot doubt that this change, so far as it prevailed, was wrought by the Spirit and power of God.⁹

Newton was truly and irresistibly converted to Christianity. The unlikeliest of men to ever come to saving faith, his conversion was, in his own words, “wrought by the Spirit and power of God.” Like the Gentiles in Romans 9 and Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9, Newton “did not pursue righteousness” on his own yet he nevertheless “obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith” (Rom. 9:30). Safe and sound in Ireland, he underwent an internal miracle. He was transformed from a child of wrath into an heir of divine blessing; from a slave of sin to a son of God.

Newton sought diligently throughout the rest of his life to remember always what he had previously been and what God had done for him. He observed the anniversary of March 10, 1748 as the day of his conversion; a day of humiliation in which he freely and willingly subjected his will to the One he so dismissively blasphemed his entire life. In order to imprint into his memory the depths of his sin from which he had been rescued by God’s grace, the born-again slave trader inscribed Deuteronomy 15:15 on his mantel: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you.”

Not long after his conversion, Newton became a pastor in England, a role in which he labored faithfully as a Calvinist for more than forty years. He was beloved by his various congregations and played a key role in encouraging fellow Calvinist William Wilberforce—a British politician and philanthropist—to fight boldly against the evils of the slave trade. The Lord had indeed changed Newton’s life in radical ways.

“*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound ...*” So begins one of the most beloved hymns of all time—*Amazing Grace*; a staple in the hymnals of many churches today. The lyrics continue, “*Thro’ many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; ‘tis*

grace has bro't me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home." The author of those autobiographical words was none other than John Newton, the self-proclaimed wretch and slave trader who once was lost but then was found; who once was enslaved but then was set free, rescued by God's irresistible and amazing grace.

How are we to explain the miraculous conversion of such an impudent and notorious God-hater as John Newton? How can sinners like him, who exhibit no inclination whatsoever for the things of God, suddenly and eagerly surrender to Christ? How is it that someone can be spiritually lost at one moment—shackled by the chains of sin and reputed to be the vilest of men—only to be found the next moment and set free? For Calvinists, the fourth petal in the T.U.L.I.P. acronym—Irresistible Grace—provides the answer.

“For Who Can Resist His Will?”

The gospel invitation is extended to every person without discrimination, promising eternal life to those who repent and believe. Whether through general revelation (Psa. 19:1-4 cf. Rom. 1:20) or special revelation (John 1:1, 14 cf. Heb. 1:1-3), God welcomes all men without distinction to “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come” and live forevermore (Isa. 55:1). But this *outward call*, extended to both the Elect and non-elect alike, is superficial at best; it is powerless to bring sinners to Christ. The reason being is because sinners are by nature dead in sin and do not have the spiritual ears to hear it. Like John Newton, they are in and of themselves unable and unwilling to forsake their evil ways and to turn to Christ for mercy.

No amount of external threatening, outward persuasion, or promises of blessing can cause blind, deaf, dead, and rebellious sinners to bow before Christ as Lord and to look to him alone for salvation. Such an act of submission is contrary to fallen man's nature. For this reason, Calvinism teaches that, in order for the Holy Spirit to bring the Elect to salvation, He must extend to them a special *inward call* that goes beyond the outward invitation. It is a spiritual stimulant, in a manner of speaking, that arouses a sinner to life, removes his blindness, opens his ears, and quells his rebellion. This inward call accomplishes what the outward call alone cannot. Inextricably linked to spiritual regeneration, it performs a work of grace within the sinner that inevitably brings him to faith in Christ. In a word, it is *irresistible*.

If we assume that Unconditional Election ranks in the minds of non-Calvinists as the most *misleading* of the Doctrines of Grace, and Limited Atonement the most *misguided*, then the doctrine of Irresistible Grace is easily the most *mischaracterized*. Very few Christians, at least insofar as I can tell, understand this doctrine accurately as it is stated in The Westminster Confession of Faith. The preposterous caricatures imposed upon it by anti-Calvinists are plentiful, if not grossly unfair, and are to blame for muddying an otherwise clear teaching in Scripture. Sadly, there is no shortage of examples.

David Servant, executive director of *Shepherd Serve Ministries*, frames his opposition to Irresistible Grace in customary Arminian fashion:

I can't help but wonder how God takes pleasure in people who are, against their wills, supposedly regenerated by God's irresistible grace. They are really nothing more than robots. If they love Him, it is only because they had no choice but to love Him, because they would have preferred to continue hating Him ... Their warm feelings toward Him are pre-programmed; thus true love is impossible ...

[Calvinists] make human beings into robots who are incapable of making moral choices and who have no capacity to love. They make Christians to be people whom God forced against their wills to become His children.¹⁰

Servant does not stand alone in his criticism. In his book *Chosen But Free*, Norman Geisler writes: "Irresistible grace on the unwilling is a violation of free choice. For God is love, and true love is persuasive but never coercive."¹¹ With his tongue planted sarcastically in his cheek, Geisler concluded: "[God] chooses [the Elect] with His irresistible power and forces them into His kingdom against their will."¹²

Drawing upon the same straw-man argument as Servant and Geisler, Hank Hanegraaff—the president of the *Christian Research Institute* and host of the *Bible Answer Man* radio broadcast—harkened back to Perry Miller (1905-1963) with his gross mischaracterization of Irresistible Grace. Hanegraaff quipped over the airwaves, "God is neither a cosmic rapist who forces His love on people, nor is He a cosmic puppeteer who forces people to love Him. Instead God grants us the freedom of choice."¹³

Lastly, but not surprisingly, Dave Hunt alleges: "Irresistible Grace is an oxymoron. Grace is the opposite of irresistible."¹⁴ He adds elsewhere, "Indeed, just as God himself cannot force anyone to love Him (a coerced response is the opposite of love), so it would be the very opposite of [irresistible] grace to force any gift or benefit of 'grace' upon anyone who did not want to receive it."¹⁵

Given the reputations of these men, their criticisms are not only unfortunate but absurdly inaccurate and academically inexcusable. It behooves us, therefore, to examine the doctrine of Irresistible Grace outside the margins of tradition and presupposition, but within the purview of historical orthodoxy. Our focus must be on the doctrine itself and on what Calvinists *actually* teach concerning grace, not on what Geisler, Servant, Hunt, and Hanegraaff *say* we teach or what they infer from Arminian propaganda.

So what do Calvinists mean when we say that God's grace is irresistible? How exactly does such grace align with the other petals in T.U.L.I.P.? And why is it essential to Calvinism? To answer these questions, we must first say what Irresistible Grace is *not*.

Irresistible Grace is not robotic faith. It does not mean that God forces a mechanical response from a sinner that is independent of the sinner's will. By the term *irresistible* we simply mean that God's grace is *effectual*—that is, it always produces an intended effect. Contrary to the aforementioned assertions made by Servant, Geisler, Hanegraaff, and Hunt, Irresistible Grace does not teach that God brings sinners to Christ against their wills, kicking and screaming, in violation of their personal choice. It is neither antithetical to free-will nor is it tantamount to coercion, divine bullying, spiritual rape, or brainwashing. Quite the opposite, it simply means that God will

unfailingly save His Elect *in cooperation* with their willful decision, not in opposition to it, by giving them the necessary resolve to come to Him in faith. Although the outward call of the gospel can be, and often is, rejected by men, the inward call of the Spirit never fails to result in the conversion of those to whom it is made.

Calvinists maintain that God draws to Himself in time and space those whom He decreed to save in eternity past. In the words of the Canons of Dort, they come to Him at the appointed time “sweetly and powerfully,”¹⁶ acting on their own accord and from renewed affections. The Spirit creates within them a new heart or a new nature whereby they can understand and believe spiritual truth. In other words, what a sinner *would not* and *could not* do while in his state of reprobation—namely, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psa. 34:8 cf. 1 Pet. 2:3)—God enables him to do through the miracle of spiritual regeneration. The intended effect is always successful and unavoidably certain. Those quickened by God’s Spirit are set free from the chains of depravity in order that they can *freely* and *willingly* “Taste ... the Lord.” It is only then, after God has given a sinner regenerated taste buds, so to speak, that he finds Christ irresistibly mouth-watering. The Westminster Confession Faith punctuates Irresistible Grace as follows:

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.¹⁷

Because the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit work in tandem in the salvation of sinners, it is *impossible* for the Holy Spirit to fail in saving those who have been given to Christ by the Father, drawn to Christ by the Spirit, and redeemed by Christ on the cross. The Spirit of God inevitably wins over those whom the Father intends to save in order that “none of them is lost” (John 17:2 cf. 6:39; 18:9).

Irresistible Grace necessarily flows from the preceding points in Calvinism. As it so happens, one cannot subscribe to Total Depravity and still deny the irresistibility of God’s grace. If a sinner is depraved in totality, dead in sin, and unable to do any good in terms of his salvation, then it stands to reason that he needs far more than mere *assistance* to be saved. Give a dead man a cane, for instance, and try though he might, he still cannot muster the functioning ability to walk on his own. He is lifeless. Instead, a dead man must first be made alive before the cane is of any value to him. So it is with a totally depraved sinner. God does not merely offer dead sinners some sort of spiritual walking stick (by way of common grace) and yet leave them paralyzed in spiritual death. On the contrary, His grace must regenerate the dead sinner to life and, concurrently, empower him with the basic muscles. Without Irresistible Grace, sinners are not able to pick up their mats and “walk in truth” (3 John 1:3). They are lifeless and paralytic.

Likewise, Irresistible Grace is the logical outgrowth of Unconditional Election. Because God has “chosen people” from before the foundations of the earth to be “a royal

priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Pet. 2:9), the salvation of the Elect must therefore depend upon God’s sovereign grace—not man’s free-will—to bring it to fulfillment. God leaves nothing, especially His decrees, to random chance. He grants a new disposition to those whom He has “transformed by the renewing of [their] minds” (Rom. 12:2) in order that, by the willful use of their new minds, “God’s purpose in election might stand” (Rom. 9:11). It is by Irresistible Grace that transformed sinners exercise their own prerogative to be saved, in keeping with God’s predetermined prerogative to save them.

Moreover, because Calvinists profess that Christ died only for his elect people, redeeming them fully from their sins, Irresistible Grace is inextricably linked to Limited Atonement. It *guarantees* that Christ’s death was not in vain but is efficacious in application. Were it not for Irresistible Grace, the value of the atonement is, at its very best, a theoretical gamble; it is dependent upon man’s supposed free-will to appropriate it. But is it theologically feasible that God would allow the death of His Son to possibly come to naught, thereby overturning His predetermined decree, if the Elect possess the freedom of the will to frustrate His intent? God forbid! It is the power of God’s grace that guarantees that the sins of those for whom Christ atoned are completely “covered over” and “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins,” is applied to them “in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Eph. 1:7)! It is no wonder that the apostle Paul proclaimed: “I do not set aside the grace of God,” because, if otherwise left to random chance, it’s possible that “Christ died for nothing!” (Gal. 2:21).

The irresistibility of God’s grace gives chosen sinners new constitutions and renewed affections by which they freely, voluntarily, willingly, knowingly, and savingly come to Christ on their own accord. It guarantees that God’s eternal decree to save a people for Himself will not fail but will come about exactly as He foreordained. Lastly, far more than a crapshoot, Irresistible Grace is an ironclad guarantee that the benefits of Christ’s death will be successfully appropriated by all those for whom it was intended. Nothing is left to chance. For these reasons, and more, Irresistible Grace forever stands as an indispensable doctrine in Calvinism.

Irresistible Grace is first set forth in the teaching of Jesus. In John 6:44, before a fickle Capernaum audience, the Lord said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me *draws him*, and I will raise him up at the last day” (emphasis added). This statement jives with our Lord’s previous words in verse 37 where he prefaced, “All that the Father gives me *will come* to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (emphasis added). These two verses combined teach that those called by God are inevitably drawn by God to Jesus Christ. They “will come” to him definitively and decisively—not possibly or potentially. Dr. John Murray (1898-1975), a Scottish-born Calvinist theologian who taught at Princeton Seminary and helped to found Westminster Theological Seminary, put it this way:

The Father draws men, places holy constraints upon them, calls them into the fellowship of his Son, and presents them to Christ as trophies of the redemption Christ himself has accomplished. ... So perish the thought that coming to Christ finds its explanation in the autonomous determinations of the human will. It finds its cause in the sovereign will of God the Father.¹⁸

The word “draw” in John 6:44 is loaded with potency. It comes from the Greek word *helkō*, meaning “to draw by inward power, lead, [and to] impel.” Those who are spiritually regenerated, in other words, are impelled to come to Christ by “inward power” granted them by the Holy Spirit.

The Greek nuances behind the word “draw” do not stop with mere “leading” or “impelling.” Interestingly enough, *helkō* also means “to ... drag.”¹⁹ It is used explicitly in this sense in reference to a *dragnet* cast by fishermen. They “drag [*helkō*] it along” the sea to secure a great catch (John 21:6). Similarly, the word is used in reference to a legal subpoena. It carries with it the authority to “drag [*helkō*] you into the Law courts” (James 2:6, WNT). Like fish caught in a dragnet, the idea is that litigants in court are dragged into their circumstances according to the determination of another. It cannot be resisted. In both examples, whether it is fish or litigants, they are neither enticed nor wooed but are *overcome* by a higher command. Thus, in light of John 21:6 and James 2:6, we see that those irresistibly drawn to Christ in John 6:44 come to him willingly, voluntarily, freely, and knowingly because they have been dragged [*helkō*] by the Spirit through His “inward power.” They are “those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father” and who are definitively “kept by Jesus Christ” (Jude 1:1).

We also witness grace in action in the conversion of Lydia of Thyatira in Acts 16. A merchant of purple dyes and fabrics (for which the city of Thyatira was known), she was the first recorded convert to Christianity in Europe. Luke records her conversion this way:

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. *The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message* (Acts 16:13-14, emphasis added).

Why did Lydia believe in the gospel preached by the apostle Paul? The answer is because God first “opened her heart” and enabled her to act in response to what she heard. Nowhere in this passage is there even the slightest hint that this divine work performed in Lydia’s heart was open to resistance. In fact, only the opposite is true. As Paul rhetorically reminds his readers, “For who can resist His will?” (Rom. 9:19, ESV).

Salvation does not depend on clever evangelistic techniques, masterful strategies, or the skills (or lack thereof) of the preacher. It is the work of God alone. “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” Paul wrote to the Corinthians. “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow” (1 Cor. 3:6-7). In the conversion of Lydia, we see a classic example where the Holy Spirit causes planted seed to bloom, “not because of anything [Lydia had] done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given [to her] in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time” (2 Tim. 1:9).

And finally, in the parable of the *Good Shepherd*, we see yet another demonstration of the irresistibility of God’s grace. The imagery that Christ used to

convey the human response to the effectual call to salvation is as striking as it is comforting. Speaking of himself as a watchman over his sheep, the Lord taught:

“... and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ... and his sheep follow him because they know his voice ... I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. *They too will listen to my voice*, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:3-4; 14-16, emphasis added).

Those elected, chosen, predestined, and called (the sheep) follow the Good Shepherd (Christ) when they hear his voice. After being spiritually regenerated, they have a newfound desire to go where he leads. They do not wander off or go astray from his path. They do not shut their ears to his summons. Instead, they willingly choose to abide in him. And their decision is predicated on the fact that they are known and loved by the Good Shepherd as his prized possession. Their names were “written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Rev. 13:8 cf. 3:5; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; Php. 4:3). They have been given to him by the Father (John 6:37). This truth alone makes certain that the sheep will obey the summons of their shepherd.

All men are dead in trespasses and sins and are unable to comprehend divine truth (1 Cor. 2:14). Unless the Holy Spirit opens their heart, as He did with the former slave-trader John Newton and with Lydia of Thyatira, they cannot and will not comprehend and believe the gospel. Such a divine work is reserved for the Holy Spirit alone—intended for the Elect alone—and is always effectual.

Aside from the *Bread of Life Discourse* in John 6:44, the parable of the *Good Shepherd* in John 10:3-16, or the conversion of Lydia in Acts 16:13-14, the fingerprints of Irresistible Grace are plastered throughout the New Testament. Paul tells us that “We have ... received the ... the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us” (1 Cor. 2:13)—that is to say, it is through the quickening of the Holy Spirit that God “has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true” (1 John 5:20). Through the calling of the Spirit, “the eyes of [our] heart may be enlightened in order that [we] may know the hope to which he has called [us]”(Eph. 1:18). To summarize, it is only through the inward call of the Holy Spirit that we come to “understand” and “know” who God truly is. He has “enlightened” us to come to Him in faith and to comprehend our calling as Christians.

The Old Testament also weighs in on Irresistible Grace. “I will *inspire them* to fear me,” God said through the prophet Jeremiah, “so that they will never turn away from me” (Jer. 32:40, emphasis added). Ezekiel adds, “And I will put my Spirit in you and *move you* to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws!” (Ezek. 36:25-27, emphasis added). And Isaiah wrote, “Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed, and the ears of those who hear will listen. The mind of the rash will know and understand ...” (Isa. 32:3-4).

Each of the aforementioned phrases—“I will inspire them,” “my Spirit [will] ... move you,” and “the mind ... will know and understand”—all speak to the re-creative

presence of the Holy Spirit who is at work in the hearts of the Elect to bring them to salvation. It is through the miracle of spiritual regeneration (says Isaiah) that elect sinners are given new dispositions whereby they are “inspired” (says Jeremiah) and “moved” (says Ezekiel) to respond in obedience to God’s summons. It is irresistible and unavoidable.

Irresistible Grace is not robotic faith. It is neither antithetical to free-will nor is it indicative of divine coercion. Rather, it teaches that God will unfailingly save His Elect in cooperation with their willful decision, not in opposition to it, by giving them renewed affections to come to Him in faith. It is monergistic in origin but synergistic in application.

We cannot sidestep Irresistible Grace, no matter how aggressive our traditions or presuppositions might war against it. It is an essential component to Calvinism, to say nothing about Christianity, because it guarantees that God’s plan of redemption will unfold exactly as He foreordained. Moreover, Irresistible Grace is not only the incontrovertible testimony of both Testaments in Scripture but it is also the wonderful testimony of every single Christian who has ever lived.

Just ask John Newton.

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*; (Kregel Publications; Revised edition, 2003); p. 18

² John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*; (Inter-Varsity Press, 1968); p. 110

³ Dick Bohrer, *John Newton: Letters of a Slave Trader Freed by God’s Grace*; (Moody Press, 1983); p. 10

⁴ *The Works of John Newton, Vol. 1*; (Banner of Truth Trust, 1985); p. 13

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 23

⁶ Bernard Martin, *An Ancient Mariner* (Wyvern Books, 1960); p. 51

⁷ *The Works of John Newton, Vol. 1*; (Banner of Truth Trust, 1985); p. 25

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 25

⁹ John Newton, *Out of the Depths*; (Moody Press, 2003); pp. 82–83

¹⁰ David Servant, *The Five Points of Calvinism Considered*; (www.ShepherdServe.org; 2007) pp. 5, 20

¹¹ Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free*; (Bethany House Publishers; 1999); p.35

¹² *Ibid.* p. 47

¹³ Hank Hanegraaff, *Bible Answer Man*, broadcast date: 2/4/2000; as cited at testallthings.com/2007/03/19/hank-hanagraaff

¹⁴ Dave Hunt & James White, *Debating Calvinism*; (Multnomah Publishers, 2004); p. 209

¹⁵ Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This? Calvinism’s Misrepresentation of God*; (Multnomah Books, 2002); p. 291

¹⁶ The Canons of Dort, Article 16

¹⁷ The Westminster Confession (1646); 10:1

¹⁸ John Murray, *Soli Deo Gloria: Essays in Reformed Theology*, ed. R.C. Sproul; (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1976)

¹⁹ Blue Letter Bible. “Dictionary and Word Search for *helkō* (Strong’s 1670).” Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2012