

Wonderful (Irresistible) Grace

This evening we turn to take up the fourth of the historic points of Calvin. Like the previous three, it has occasioned much opposition from those within the church as much as those without. The whole issue of God's sovereignty in salvation, of course, has been debated on many occasions within the church, the most notable being in the fifth century between Augustine and Pelagius; then in the early 16th century between Luther and Erasmus; and more directly related to this series of addresses, Calvin and Arminius in the 17th Century.

In each of these cases, the writings of Augustine, Luther and Calvin were in response to the error being propagated by their opponents. And one of the errors being spread in Calvin's day by Arminius was, amongst others, that the Holy Spirit can be effectually resisted. This was the fourth of his five articles. Calvin's five points were a response to each of these in turn. (Leaflet available which may be of some little help to you). You will excuse me if there is reference to some of the previous points in the course of this address.

Now at first, Arminius seems to have a point because it sounds biblical. After all, there are many ways in which the Bible speaks of man resisting God's call to salvation.

51 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Acts 7:51 8 Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these men oppose the truth-men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. 2 Timothy 3:8

So, not everyone who hears the gospel believes; therefore, it is reasoned, man must be able to refuse the offer of salvation made to him. And many subsidiary arguments have been added to this.

Man must have the ability to choose or else it is not genuine offer; man must have the ability to choose or else he cannot be held accountable for not responding; God made man a free agent and he must be able to freely choose to follow Christ.

So what do we mean by the irresistible call of the Holy Spirit? Simply that there is a call made to sinners by Christ which is so persuasive that sinners, 'come most freely' to believe and trust in him.

WCF 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 (Rom_8:30; Rom_11:7; Eph_1:10, Eph_1:11), by His Word and Spirit (2Co_3:3, 2Co_3:6; 2Th_2:13, 2Th_2:14), out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ (Rom_8:2; Eph_2:1-5; 2Ti_1:9, 2Ti_1:10); enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God (Act_26:18; 1Co_2:10, 1Co_2:12; Eph_1:17, Eph_1:18); taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh (Eze_36:26); renewing their wills, and by His almighty power determining them to that which is good (Deu_30:6; Eze_11:19; Eze_36:27; Phi_2:13), and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ (Joh_6:44, Joh_6:45; Eph_1:19): yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace (Psa_110:3; Son_1:4; Joh_6:37; Rom_6:16-18).

10:2 This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man (Rom_9:11; Eph_2:4, Eph_2:5, Eph_2:8, Eph_2:9; 2Ti_1:9; Tit_3:4, Tit_3:5), who is altogether passive therein, until being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit (Rom_8:7; 1Co_2:14; Eph_2:5), he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it (Eze_36:27; Joh_5:25; Joh_6:37).

Let us break this down a little to help in our understanding of this great truth.

A. There is an outward call of the gospel.

Every time the gospel is declared and sinners are called to come to Jesus Christ the outward call is issued. This is the invitation that is extended by Christians to sinners without distinction to drink freely of the water of life. This is what the church of Jesus Christ does in obedience to Christ's command, she 'goes into all the world and preaches the gospel.' And all who hear are accountable before God for how they respond. The rejection that Jesus faced is described in these terms,

37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Matthew 23:37

But we know from scripture and experience confirms that this outward call often does not meet with a good reception. Rather the opposite is so often the case. Now ask yourself, why would someone turn down the offer of eternal salvation and all the many blessings that that salvation brings to a person? Why? Well, one answer we have already seen in this series and that was on the very first evening - sinners are dead in sin and unable to respond to this message. But more than that - sinners choose to reject this call to repentance and faith.

8 and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."

They stumble because they disobey the message-which is also what they were destined for. 1 Peter 2:8

19 So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. Hebrews 3:19

2 For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Hebrews 4:2

And no amount of threats or promises will cause blind, deaf, rebellious sinners to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. To use an analogy from the radio, which, like all analogies, has its failings. If you do not have the Long Wave band on your radio, you cannot tune into the radio station Atlantic252. It doesn't matter that you have the AM band or the FM band. It doesn't matter what other stations you can tune in to; if you don't have long wave, you can't hear the programme 252. It doesn't matter what else sinners are able to hear and respond to, in the words of Paul

14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 1 Corinthians 2:14

That is, they are only received on the spiritual waveband, which the sinner does not have!!

So, that begs the question, how then does any sinner come to faith in Christ, since all are by nature dead in trespass and in sin?

B. The Inward Call of the Spirit.

In addition to the outward call of the gospel, issued by Christians in sharing that gospel, there is the special inward call of the Holy Spirit. Through this special call the Holy Spirit performs a work of grace within the sinner which brings him to faith in Christ, and this

call is such that it cannot be resisted - or to put it positively, the sinner willingly and gladly responds and he is able to do this because the Spirit has changed his nature. What we call regeneration, or the much used term, 'born again'.

There is a common call, of which it is said, "Many are called, but few are chosen," but this of which we are now thinking is another kind of call, which betokens special love, and necessitates the possession of that to which we are called. In such a case it is with the called one even as with Abraham's seed, of whom the Lord said, "I have called thee from the ends of the earth, and said unto thee, Thou art my servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away." Spurgeon - 'All of Grace'

Now what all does this call consist of? In one sentence it consists of giving the sinner a new nature. How does the sinner be able to hear this inward call? Let us look at the various steps that the Scripture sets before us in bringing a sinner to repentance and faith.

(i) He bestows a new nature

6 The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. Deuteronomy 30:6

26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Ezekiel 36:26,27

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17

(ii) This new nature brings life

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, . . . but God . . . 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions Ephesians 2:1,5

13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. Colossians 2:13

(iii) this life gives the ability to respond

12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. 1 Corinthians 2:12

(iv) The instrument he uses is the Word

23 For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. 1 Peter 1:23

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18

So this inward call of the Spirit includes these various aspects, each one of which is necessary

C. This Inward Call is Effectual in all those Elected by The Father, and Redeemed by the Son.

There are those who by their false doctrine create all sorts of amazing contradictions for themselves. In their zeal to protect the

right and ability of the sinner to choose or reject Christ; they deny God the right and the power to choose who will be saved. Paul's analogy must then be re-written to read, "Does not the clay have the right to choose how the potter moulds him, for noble or common use?" They thereby deny the fact that Christ's death saved anyone; since according to them, Christ died for everyone, but not all are saved - hence Christ's death saved no-one, it is the sinner's faith that must save them. Then evidently, they must argue that the Holy Spirit makes everyone able to respond but there are those who choose not to - i.e. to resist the Holy Spirit.

Let us listen to Jesus' words, because, to my mind, they so simply state this profound truth.

14 "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-and I lay down my life for the sheep.16 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.

The Jews gathered round him, saying, 'how long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly. 25 Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me,26 but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish;

John 10:14-16,25-28

D. Man's action in repentance and faith is a result of God's choosing, Christ's redeeming and of the Spirit's regenerating.

That repentance and faith must be exercised by man is not in question. The gospel of Christ requires it and those who have never re-

pented or believed on Christ will not be saved. But while the requirement to act is ours, the power to act is of God's giving. And that is granted by the work of the Holy Spirit.

31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. Acts 5:31

18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." Acts 11:18

14 One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. Acts 16:14

30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. Romans 8:30
For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God; not of works lest any man should boast. Eph.2:8,9

And the work is called irresistible because man cannot frustrate it!
25 I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. John 5:25

37 All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. John 6:37

1 After Jesus said this, he looked towards heaven and prayed:
"Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.
2 For you granted him authority over all people that he

might give eternal life to all those you have given him.⁶ "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²⁴ "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. John 17:1,2,6,20,24.

The Lord is King! Who then shall dare resist His will, distrust his care, or murmur at his wise decrees or doubt his royal promises? That God is resolved to save sinners, means that He himself must provide all the means necessary to their salvation. Since he provides all that is necessary, there is nothing that we contribute towards our salvation. That is why we call it wonderful grace, irresistible grace. It is God's wondrous salvation bestowed upon wholly undeserving sinners.

Thomas Goodwin - "My brothers, all the offers of eternity, all the persuasions of men and angels, will not make a man part with his lusts, his pleasures nor his sins, to take or accept the offers of eternity. Only the power of God, with whom all things are possible, can destroy these old things, making a new creature with faith in Christ Jesus.

In practice, what is the effect of this truth.

1. It affects our evangelistic practice.

If man is capable of resisting the gospel call, then it is incumbent upon the preacher to do all in his power to overcome this resistance, since, according to the error, God is either incapable of doing it or at least is not allowed to! So over the last one hundred years we have had examples of emotional appeals, repetitive altar calls,

15 verses of Just as I am. Now of course, the scripture exhorts us to plead with people, to reason with them, but this is always directed to the will, not the emotions. I believe one of the greatest problems we face within the church today is as a result of this mistake. Because we have many people who in times past responded to some emotional appeal, put their hand up, went forward, said the sinner's prayer, but show little evidence of true conversion. But convince them they are not saved?! They are often the hardest now to reach. Let us be content to set Christ before sinners, in Paul's words by all means let us beseech them to be reconciled to Christ, but let us leave to God that which we cannot effect, the change that requires a miracle of divine grace.

2. It encourages our evangelistic efforts.

Listen, if man is as dead in sin as the Bible says, then preaching to persuade him to convert is the most pointless exercise on the face of this earth, unless, of course, the power of God is at work. And such is the promise of God.

25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" 26 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Matthew 19:25,26

4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 2 Corinthians 10:4

18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18

Here is the confidence that the preacher and the ordinary Christian have in sharing the gospel of Christ. In the hand of God that message is able to break down strongholds. It is the message that is the power of God, not the messenger!!

Let me finish with, what I believe is one of the clearest examples of this principle in scripture and it concerns Lazarus.

Jesus comes to the tomb where Lazarus has been lying for the last four days. He is well and truly dead!! He cannot move because he has no power; he cannot hear because he has no life. He is physically what every sinner is spiritually, absolutely and utterly helpless to come out of that grave of his own accord. Further, no matter how many people stand at the entrance of the tomb shouting at him, telling him to get out of there, telling him, only believe and he can live, explaining how bright and sunny it is; how fresh the air is; how good it is to be alive; he doesn't budge.

When Jesus comes, he speaks, and 'listening to his voice, new life the dead receive.' The word of Christ which brought life in the beginning; here bestows life to the dead. Alive, Lazarus hears the command of Christ 'Come out' and decides - no I'm happier lying here in this tomb of death, I'll resist this command - far from it!! The scripture says, 'The dead man came out'. Isn't that a strange expression - how can the dead come out? We know what it means! The one who was dead was made alive by the word of Christ, was able to hear the command of Christ, and now had the power to respond to the call of Christ - and did, gladly, freely and willingly!

Such is the confidence we have today - not in ourselves, God forbid, but in the God who is building his church and neither the gates of hell nor the rebellious wills of men shall frustrate his purpose in doing so.

