

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## HARDLY Irresistible

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Humans are instinctive synergists. We emerge from the womb certain that: our wills are supreme and that nothing of importance about us may be decided by another. The democratic ethos of modernity fuels the fire set in us by original sin. Like the poet William Ernest Henley, most claim sovereignty over their own souls: "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul."

Then again, maybe not. The Reformed doctrine of irresistible grace attacks the very heart of this claim, teaching that salvation is effected by the call of God, actualized in the sinner by an irresistible movement of grace. We are not the captains of our souls.

Sinners do bear the duty of believing the Gospel, and a human decision to believe the Gospel is required for salvation. But how does the sinner come to believe in Christ? What explains the transformation that is effected in the sinner whereby he seeks the very Savior he has so resisted? The doctrine of irresistible grace is indispensable in explaining that saving grace, once applied to the sinner, cannot and will not be resisted.

As Jesus explained, " 'All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out' " (John 6:37) Effectual calling and irresistible grace affirm the divine monergism in the initiation of salvation. Salvation is Christ's work applied to the sinner by the Father's sovereign act.

These doctrines are routinely dismissed in evangelical circles, parodied as elements of an outmoded and undemocratic system. Enemies of irresistible grace portray sinners saved against their wills, brought kicking and resisting to the gift of salvation. This comes with the parallel parody of the sinner earnestly seeking salvation but denied grace by a divine Despot. We must put these caricatures to rest.

Modern evangelicalism is so theologically anemic that most American Christians have but the barest understanding of the Gospel. They believe that their salvation is established in the primacy of their decision to receive Christ. They are unable to explain how they came to believe in Christ, and many are simply unaware that the Bible even speaks to the subject.

Of course, irresistible grace is but one component of the saving work of God. Irresistible grace cannot be severed from effectual calling, regeneration, and the comprehensive

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work of God in applying salvation to the sinner. This essential doctrine explains that God's sovereign work is essentially monergistic—it is God's act.

As John Murray explained, "We become partakers of redemption by an act of God that instates us in the realm of salvation, and all the corresponding changes in us and in our attitudes and reactions are the result of the saving forces at work within the realm into which, by God's sovereign and efficacious act, we have been ushered."

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We have been ushered in. The effectual call is demonstrated in an irresistible work of grace that is demonstrated in the sinner's glad acceptance of the Gospel. This truth has the two-fold effect of magnifying the gracious work of God and denying that our salvation is in any way our own work.

The denial of irresistible grace unravels the integrity of the Bible's presentation of Christ's work applied to sinners. The message of the cross becomes a product put up for sale, a message marketed to an audience, or a therapy offered to the sick.

Missing from this rudimentary understanding is the glorious vision of God's eternal purpose to redeem His elect people by the atonement so perfectly achieved by Jesus Christ. Instead, many evangelicals assume that God is a spectator. He initiated the plan of salvation, raised Jesus from the dead, and now waits.

How will they come? Without irresistible grace, we must assume that the sinner will be drawn by the force of our argument, the persuasiveness of our speech, the eloquence of our preaching, or our persistence in witnessing.

This explains what so many Christians believe about evangelism. They understand the necessity of the external call. They witness to their neighbors, confront sinners with the Gospel, and focus with intensity upon the will of the sinner.

Charles Finney's "new measures" were designed specifically to target the will of the sinner. His techniques were intended to reach "the simple volition of the sinner's mind." The same is often true today. Preachers and evangelists assume that they possess the power to reach the sinner's heart, so they direct all their energies toward breaking the will of the sinner and bringing him to Christ.

Manipulation and shallow evangelism almost inevitably result. Evangelism is very quickly reduced to salesmanship. Faith, regeneration, repentance, and belief in Christ are confused, but each is assumed to be the act of the sinner in seeking salvation and the responsibility of the evangelist in offering it.

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R.B. Kuiper corrects this confusion: "Saving faith is not a gift of the evangelist to his unsaved hearer; 'it is the gift of God' (Eph. 2:8). No evangelist ever imparted faith in Christ to a single soul; it is wrought in human hearts by the Holy Spirit, for 'no man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost' (1 Cor. 12:3). No sinner was ever converted by an evangelist; the author of conversion is God."

The faithful evangelist knows that we are charged to proclaim the Gospel to sinners, and has confidence that God will bring sinners to Christ and that the signs of true conversion will follow. We are heralds assigned to preach a message, not salesmen charged to market a product.

Effectual calling and irresistible grace remind us of God's sovereign saving purpose, even as we take up our task as witnesses. By His Word and Spirit, God is pleased to call sinners away from their sin and to Christ. Their hearts of stone are turned into hearts of flesh, and, drawn to Christ, they come willingly and freely. They now desire Christ, and will have no rest until they answer the call of the Gospel. The grace that works within them, accomplishing this transformation, is not their own work but the gift of God.

This is our confidence. Even the one who appears most resistant may one day be drawn to the Gospel. As John Calvin reminds us, "Since the conversion of a man is in the hand of God, who knows whether they who today appear unteachable shall be suddenly changed by the power of God, into other men?" Thus, Calvin explained, our task is "sowing and watering" while we wait for the increase from God.

The denial of irresistible grace leads to a human-centered understanding of the Gospel, produces pride in the hearts of sinners, and encourages manipulation in evangelism. We are commissioned as witnesses to the Gospel, preaching and teaching the Word of God—all the while confident that the Divine Evangelist is seeking and saving the lost.

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<sup>1</sup> (2002). *Tabletalk Magazine*, June 2002: *Irresistible Grace*, 14–16.