

The Five Disputed Points of Calvinism: The “I” in TULIP- Irresistible Grace

At the age of fourteen I came to personal faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

As a child I did not grow up going to church, so consequently I did not have a nurtured faith experience. But by the time I was a teenager I knew there was something wrong with me spiritually. I also felt like I had a huge void in my life. I was running with the wrong crowd, getting involved in the wrong kind of things, and heading down a path where I would have made some terrible decisions had God not intervened.

Before my conversion I remember having an increasing curiosity about God and also a deepened awareness of my sin and depravity. I feared that if I died I would face the judgment of God for my sins. (Contrary to what many people think today, this is a good fear to have.) I remember trying to read the Bible, the book of Revelation albeit, and not being able to make sense of it. So there was a part of me that was seeking, though I may not have been consciously aware of that, but there was also a part of me that was enslaved to the desires of the flesh.

My best friend had come to faith in Jesus Christ a few months before my own conversion and he began to share with me his newfound zeal for God. At first, I was very resistant to his witness and testimony, but one day I finally agreed to go and visit with the retired church secretary who lived below him in the apartment complex. Her name was Joyce Sawyer. I knew there was something different about that woman and it was because of her faith. I knew she was a Christian by the way she talked and acted. Humanly speaking, I was not supposed to be there. Why would a fourteen year old teenager want to hear what she had to say? My best friend came to faith through the witness of star athletes at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes rally, but me through a retired church secretary? This did not make sense.

In any case, on that morning of July 3rd I came to faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. Joyce Sawyer invited me to tell the truth about myself in front of God- that I am a sinner, with no hope of saving myself apart from God’s grace, and to admit before God that I need Jesus’ shed blood on the cross for the forgiveness of my sins, and that I need to receive Jesus into my heart on the grounds of simple, childlike faith. That is the day I became a Christian, or to put it in a more Calvinistic way that is the day God made a Christian out of me.

The Prevenient (Beforehand) Grace of God That Enables Us to Embrace Christ

At the time of my conversion I did not understand the ways God was working in my life from behind the scenes. I do not presume to understand it all now, but I do understand more now than I did then.

If you would have asked me at the time about my conversion I would have told you that it was me that enabled me to put my faith in Christ. That was something that I did in my **own** strength and of my **own** volition.

I had no concept that God was actually changing, turning, redirecting, converting, and enabling my dead heart to receive Jesus as Lord. It was my own strength that did the trick, so I thought. But as I have gotten older, and especially since I have become a Presbyterian and a solid convert to the reformed understanding of the Christian faith, I have come to see how it was the Lord who was changing and enabling my heart to embrace Jesus Christ. Like Lydia's story in the book of Acts, the Lord opened my closed heart and enabled me to believe.

What I have just described for you in personal terms is the doctrine of irresistible grace. God had made Jesus taste so good, that I didn't want anything else. God had worked on my spirit so much that there was no way I was going to say no. What God was doing in that whole process was he was "breaking my heart of stone" and putting a "new heart of flesh" in me, just as it says in our text from Ezekiel.

Now why must God do that in order for us to come to faith?

Connecting the Doctrine of Irresistible Grace to Total Depravity and Predestination

Well, it all goes back to the first sermon on the first point of the five disputed points of Calvinism, the doctrine of total depravity.

Because of man's sinful nature, he has gotten himself into trouble and entrapped himself to the bondage of sin, and unless God does something to fix it, he shall remain stuck. But when God, from before the very foundations of the world, decides to fix it, by predestining us to be his chosen people in Christ, he fixes our hearts of stone. He **will** work on our hearts to the point that our wills will freely embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. God **will** do it. His saving grace will accomplish its purpose, every time. So I ask you, could God's saving grace be any thing else besides irresistible?

There Are Some Things We Can Resist, But Not God's Saving Grace

There are many things that we can resist in this life. I love hotdogs. Usually I can't resist them because they taste so good, but occasionally I can muster up the strength to say no, because I know they are bad for me. As Christians we can even resist the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives **after** we come to faith in Christ. We are called to grow in holiness, but we still have this sinful nature that we are at war with. Sometimes we will resist and lose some battles. But God's saving grace offered to us in Jesus Christ, whether we come to believe in it gradually or suddenly, that can **not** be resisted.

When God chooses to save us in Jesus Christ from before the very foundations of the world, he will save us by rebirthing our dead spirits and releasing bound up wills. Nothing will stop God from doing this.

God will go to great lengths. God will redirect the footsteps of a man like Paul and keep him from going to one place so that he will go to another, in order to save one woman's heart named Lydia, who was ripe to receive Jesus. Some theologians call irresistible grace, God's invincible grace.

Question 67 of the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith sums up quite well the invincible grace of God in converting the heart of a sinner to faith in Jesus Christ.

Q. What is effectual calling?

A. Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.

God Does All the Saving, Not Us

So what all this means in terms of our salvation through the cross of Jesus Christ is this:

- (1) It is **God** who **convicts** us of our sins. The Holy Spirit shows us our need for a Savior, by exposing to us the depths of our depravity. This is God's work, not man's. Jesus himself said the Holy Spirit would come after him, for the purpose of convicting us of our guilt and sin (Jn.16:8)
- (2) It is **God** who **bends** our wills toward him. It is not enough to be convicted of sin. That's a start, but left alone it is insufficient. Somehow, someday, your will must be **redirected** away from yourself and back to God. This is something only God can do. You can't do it- you can only be **empowered** to do it! God is your gasoline, so to speak. Without his saving grace working in your engine, you won't run. As it says in our text from Acts, the Lord must "open your heart."
- (3) It is **God** who **enables** you to confess Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Yes, God convicts you of your sin and your need for a Savior, and then God **twists** your heart toward him so that your human will is now freely pointed toward Christ, but there is one other step that God must enable you to do. God must enable you to put your faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Faith is the vehicle that makes your salvation real. Now your faith doesn't save you, only Jesus' work on the cross can do that, but your faith does make your salvation effective, that is, it kicks it into high gear. Only God can do this work. Paul said in I Corinthians 12:3, that no one can say that "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

Friend this is not a dead doctrine, but one that gives life to the church. It is true, it is right, and it is Biblical. Our salvation fully and completely rests in the hands of God, and God's love is so great for us- his chosen people- that nothing will ever get in God's way, or keep him from saving us! God's saving grace is invincible. Our sin and depravity could not overcome it; therefore God and God alone should get the glory for our salvation. To God be the glory!

Conclusion

Our proper response to this grace should be one of gratitude and renewed commitment to live the Christian life.

On that note, I will close this sermon with a prayer that was offered by Dr. Ben Lacy Rose in his sermon on *Irresistible Grace*.

Thank you, Father, for making me your child. Thank you for working faith in my heart. And thank you for bringing me “through many dangers, toils, and snares.” Although I have slipped and fallen repeatedly; although I am often tempted to leave you, continue, I pray, to sustain me in the faith until the end, and enable me more and more to live a life that is pleasing to you- a life that shows my gratitude and confirms my salvation.

May God grant us the strength to make this our prayer.

Amen.