

# Irresistible Grace

(by Bob Pulliam)

It is called the "doctrine of irresistible grace" (also known as "The Efficacious Call of the Spirit"). This doctrine would have us believe that those who are saved have no choice in the matter. Even if they would wish otherwise, God must save those whom He has chosen. To allow otherwise would be to permit a totally depraved creature (another false doctrine) to thwart God's predestination. Those who are saved, then, are saved irresistibly. So you may be sure that I have not exaggerated their position, note the following quotations:

"...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." (Steele & Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 1963, p48)

"Although the general outward call of the gospel can be, and often is, rejected, the special inward call of the Spirit never fails to result in the conversion of those to whom it is made. This special call is not made to all sinners but is issued to the elect only!" (ibid, p49)

The "outward call" is the preaching of the gospel. This is not enough, according to Calvinists. In fact, they would have us believe that it does nothing! They do not teach such, but let's face it; when you teach that no one has ever been saved by the preaching of the gospel without the intervention of the Spirit, you teach that the gospel is ineffective.

Now if God does indeed wish to operate this way, I have no objection. God is God, and I am nothing but dust. But we must find proof of this doctrine before we can uphold it.

## ***Proof Texts...***

Any passage that speaks of the Spirit and salvation within one breath is brought into play here. For example, Romans 8:14 tells us that, "...as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." It is assumed that the Spirit here is directly leading the individual. But the context actually tells us how the individual is led. This section is a contrast between two forces which a person may submit to. On the one hand, there is the flesh and it's desires. Verse thirteen says: "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." We understand this living "according to the flesh". It refers to succumbing to the desires within. What would living "by the Spirit" mean? The Calvinist would tell us:

"The inward change, which is thus wrought through the Holy Spirit, results from God's power and grace, and in no way is He dependent upon man's help for success in this work." (ibid, p50)

This returns to the idea presented earlier... The Calvinist believes that the Spirit forces salvation on individuals. But living "by the Spirit" is not something that the Spirit does to us. It does not speak of an enabling of the Spirit. When it says "by", it obviously refers to the yielding of the individual. Is the individual yielding to an irresistible power? No, it is a yielding to the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (8:2). The individual's will is clearly in view here, and Paul is exhorting the Romans to yield their wills to God. Otherwise he would simply be explaining what is otherwise unnecessary for them to know (i.e. what the Spirit does to them irregardless of their will). This is an aspect of God's word that the Calvinist has to cope with. Why is it necessary? They imagine that hearing it in some way

activates the Spirit to work in individuals. When Paul told the Romans why the word needed to be preached in Romans ten, he told them that it was necessary to produce faith (Rom 10:17). He did not say "the Spirit comes by hearing", he said "faith comes by hearing".

John 3:3-6 is a popular passage to use as a proof text. Here, the emphasis is on being born of the Spirit. No emphasis is placed upon being born of the water, because it conflicts with what the Calvinist wants to believe. At the beginning of the section on "The Scriptures" below, we will answer this text.

John 1:12f is also used in this regard. It says, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." The emphasis here is placed on being born of God, as if that could only take place by a miraculous intervention of the Spirit. But note the progression here. It is to those who "received Him" that He gave the right to become children of God. The "right" is what they received, leaving the decision up to them. The passage does not tell us how they were born of God. It only states the fact, the details of which we must discern elsewhere.

### ***The Scriptures...***

How is one "born again"? The Calvinist makes it a process that takes place wholly of God's will, and not of our own. For them, it becomes something that the Spirit does to our hearts. But the Bible clearly interprets itself in this regard.

Peter wrote, "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever," (I Pt 1:22f). Note that these people had "purified" themselves in "obeying the truth through the Spirit". What does through the Spirit mean? The next verse tells us. They were born again through the word of God. That which the Spirit revealed (the word) had taught them what to obey. The Spirit gave Peter his words on Pentecost, and the words for this epistle. We need not look for some inner word that was whispered to these people. It is all found in what the apostles published abroad among these people. James told his readers that they were begotten by the word of truth (Jms 1:18). Was it through the Spirit? Yes, it was through what the Spirit had revealed --- the truth. When Paul wrote to Titus of a "renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5), he was expressing the same idea that he had written to the Romans when he wrote, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." (Rom 12:2). It is all a change that is wrought within the individual, not by a miraculous make-over, but by the individual putting to death the old man of sin, and serving Christ in sincerity and truth (Eph 4:20-24).

Jesus spoke of being born of the water and the Spirit. The water in this passage is bypassed to accommodate an operation of the Spirit which never actually occurs. The water is as much something that Nicodemus would have to do as the Spirit. Both are being commanded by Jesus. And when we turn to Acts, we find people being born again. They are taught the word (of the Spirit), and baptized (in water). It is as Paul said concerning Jesus and the church, "that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word,". The saved are those who are born again, and the church is made up of the saved. The Lord adds to the church those who are saved (Acts 2:47). And Paul said that Jesus sanctifies and cleanses the church by the "washing of water by the word".

Being born of the Spirit is explained in the passages above which speak of being born again by the word of God. The Spirit revealed the word, and dictates the change that must be wrought in the individual. That change is accomplished by the individual heeding the word revealed by the Spirit.

The Calvinist would give the gospel a superficial role, it not really doing anything other than waking up the Spirit to save any particular individual. The scriptures teach that the gospel plays more than a superficial role in salvation. It is the "power of God unto salvation" (Rom 1:16).

### ***Conclusion...***

Does God save men against their will? Does the Holy Spirit save only some who God wanted to save from the beginning, leaving all others for hell? One wanting salvation need not wait for the Spirit to do something to them. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16), calls unto salvation, instructs so that obedience may be rendered, and gives us hope by it's wise revelation. God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30f), because God will judge the world. The command to repent goes out to all who will be judged in this passage. If men cannot repent, then God is guilty of demanding that which is impossible of them; which is utterly absurd in view of the tenor of love and grace revealed in the scriptures. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom 10:17). Salvation truly is the free gift of God, but we still need to pull off the wrapping paper to get it. We must exercise the choice God so clearly indicates we have in scripture.