

Why Do We Believe *That?*

Class 15 – TULIP

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Michael Horton, *For Calvinism*
(Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011)

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Most Arminians will agree that we cannot make the slightest move toward God apart from his grace. We have already pointed out that classic Arminianism at least affirms original sin and the natural bondage to sin apart from grace. Nevertheless, many who have identified themselves with this Arminian stream have in fact made this Pelagian move. Yet even in evangelical Arminianism, the Spirit's work is always conditioned on human cooperation. According to H. Orton Wiley, "the Holy Spirit exerts His regenerating power only on certain conditions, that is, on the conditions of repentance and faith."

To Calvinist ears, this sounds like demanding that a blind person see before he or she has been healed of blindness. The glory of the new covenant is that God gives in the gospel what he demands in his law: both justification and the renewal of heart and life. Only because of God's one-sided act of regeneration does anyone repent and believe. So even though Arminianism should not be equated with semi-Pelagianism, it does in fact deny that the new birth is a unilateral act of God's grace. Every person is graciously enabled to believe, and the new birth is the consequence rather than the source of that decision.

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Why do some who hear the gospel believe while others do not? This is a question that confronts every Christian, especially as we long for the conversion of loved ones. Caricatures abound on both sides of this issue. On one hand, it is sometimes assumed that Arminians believe that the fall has left the will unaffected; though weakened by sin, we are still free to choose or reject the gospel apart from any gracious assistance. I pointed out in chapter 1 that this is a misunderstanding, since at least Arminius and classical (evangelical) Arminians usually hold that no one can believe in Christ apart from grace.

At the other end is the caricature of Calvinism as teaching that God drags People into heaven kicking and screaming against their will, while denying grace to others who seek him but are not elect. As I argue below, the infelicitous term "irresistible grace" — popularized in the I of "TULIP" — contributes to that caricature. Traditionally, Reformed theology has referred to this inward work of the Spirit through the gospel as *effectual calling*, not as *irresistible grace*. "Irresistible" suggests coercion, the sort of causal impact that is exercised when force is applied to someone or something. As we will see, Calvinism denies in explicit terms that God coerces people against their will, either toward belief or unbelief.

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We cannot be persuaded into the kingdom by the greatest of rhetoricians or subject matter; We need to be liberated from within to embrace the gospel from without. This is why "irresistible grace" is simply the wrong term for the work that our Reformed confessions identify as effectual calling. In the words of Canons of Dort, the Spirit "pervades the inmost recesses of man; he opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised" and "quickens the dead."

This is the language of Jeremiah 31. This is not mere "moral persuasion," as if, "after God has performed His part, it still remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not." Yet neither is it coercive. Rather, it is "a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection of the dead," It is not without reason that the New Testament compares regeneration to these miraculous events

*Westminster Confession of Faith***Article 10 – Of Effectual Calling**

- I. 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.
- II. This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from any thing at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.
- III. Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.
- IV. Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come to Christ, and therefore can not be saved: much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the law of that religion they do profess; and to assert and maintain that they may is without warrant of the Word of God.

Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities*
(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006)

p. 159-160

The key distinctive doctrine of Arminianism is prevenient grace. It may not be a biblical term, but it is a biblical concept assumed everywhere in Scripture. It is the powerful but resistible drawing of God that Jesus spoke about in John 6. Contrary to what some Calvinist commentators argue, the Greek word *elkô* (e.g., John 6:44) does not have to mean "drag" or "compel" (as claimed, for example, by Calvinist theologian R. C. Sproul in *Chosen by God*). According to various Greek lexicons it can mean draw or attract. Arminians believe that if a person is saved, it is because God initiated the relationship and enabled the person to respond freely with repentance and faith. This prevenient grace includes at least four aspects or elements: calling convicting illuminating and enabling. No person can repent, believe and be saved without the Holy Spirit's supernatural support from beginning to end. All the person does is cooperate by not resisting.