

# Dispensationalism and TULIP – Irresistible Grace

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Limited Atonement, with its intentional combining of the accomplishment of the atonement with its application, thereby making the atonement itself effectual, paves the way for this next letter of TULIP. Irresistible (or effectual or efficacious) grace is also a necessary corollary to the particular (I don't say "peculiar") understanding of Total Depravity usually maintained in Reformed theology. It is closely related with "Effectual Calling" and is often included under that heading in Reformed Confessions and books. In fact, if it weren't that one does not spell "tulip" TULEP I'm sure it would be known as Effectual Calling.

## Here are some definitions:

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. – Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. 10.1

For those struggling with the archaic language here (shame on you) I call your attention to the order of salvation set out by the Westminster Divines. The minds of elect sinners are enlightened or opened to understand the Gospel. This is done by giving them a new nature (heart) so that they will then freely believe in Christ.

John Murray writes,

It is calling that is represented in Scripture as that act of God by which we are actually united to Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:9). And surely union with Christ is that which unites us to the inwardly operative grace of God. Regeneration is the beginning of inwardly operative saving grace. – *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 93.

Notice how the proposition depends on the premise that calling unites us to Christ (although the 1 Corinthians reference does not directly relate this calling to union with Christ). While this passage and Romans 8:30 do point to "nothing less than the call which is efficacious unto salvation" (89), they do not point to what Murray wishes they would. It is one thing to say the effectual call brings a person (mysteriously – cf. Jn. 3:8) to embrace the Gospel; it is quite another to identify it as the new birth itself.

Boettner, the 1689 Confession, and many other Reformed writings refer to regeneration as "spiritual resurrection," but this sort of thing is not a good practice. The Bible knows nothing of *spiritual* resurrections. Of course, this language is encouraged by Reformed theologians use of the Raising of Lazarus as if it really illustrated the new birth. They do this by tying the deadness

of Lazarus's lifeless corpse to the spiritual deadness of the unregenerated sinner in Ephesians 2:1. But this is a case of gross equivocation. The corpse of Lazarus was just a shell without the person inside. The sinner is an embodied person who does respond actively in disobedience (Eph. 2:3) to God (cf. Rom. 1:18-22). Clearly, Paul uses *nekrous* ("dead") in Ephesians 2 figuratively, not, as would be the case with John 11, literally. Hence, the one passage has no bearing at all on the other.

Again, any dispensationalist ought to spot this and call Reformed writers on it. For one thing, if we were to allow John 11 to stand as an illustration of Ephesians 2:1-3 how could Paul call sinners "sons of *disobedience*" who "*walked* according to the course of this world" fulfilling their worldly "*desires*"? Lazarus's dead body was not disobedient (how absurd a thought!), neither did it walk, nor did it have any desires! Lazarus himself was not in it!

Whatever the "deadness" of Ephesians 2:1 is (it is separation from God under the reign of sin) it is not like a dead corpse! Howbeit R.C. Sproul lets his imagination run amuck when he makes his entire argument for irresistible grace turn on John 11. He allots himself 17 pages of *Grace Unknown* to explaining this doctrine, and his sole proof-text is the Raising of Lazarus! Dispensationalists shouldn't touch such allegorical interpretation with a barge-pole.

### **What of the Supporting Passages?**

Monergism has a group of passages which back irresistible grace. As we look at them I again want to say that my theme is only whether dispensationalists can derive the Reformed definitions (given above) from the texts given.

The first two are from Psalms (65:4; 110:3) and have not a thing to do with the effectual call as laid out above. In the former Van Gemen says the verse could refer to either be priests or Israel. The context is national and is not addressing how a person comes to Christ. Psalm 110:3 bespeaks a battle scene not a Gospel invitation.

So having dealt with the two misused OT passages, what supports are to be found in the New? They are, John 6:37-40, 44-45, 63; Romans 8:30; Galatians 1:15-16; Ephesians 1:18-20; 2:1-5, 8-9; Philippians 1:29; Colossians 2:12. The John 6 references teach that which we certainly do not deny; that God Himself brings the sinner to Himself. They do not teach that He does this by *regenerating* them: that is deduced from other premises not in the verses themselves. For example, Cornelius is being drawn to Christ in Acts 10 (he was "dead in trespasses and sin" until 10:44, although it could be argued that Eph. 2:1 more properly refers to sinners left to themselves). The calling of Romans 8:30 is not identified by the Apostle as regeneration, neither need it be. The Galatians passage refers to a summons to salvation and ministry, but it does not construe the summons as regeneration (i.e. salvation itself). That God's grace operates to draw or call the sinner is clear. If that were all that was involved in irresistible grace there would be no difficulty accepting it. **But to go on and label it regenerating grace is to go beyond the evidence of the NT text and to impose one's own inferences upon Scripture.**

In Ephesians 1:18-20 Paul is plainly writing about those who had already been born-again. The verse is simply ripped from its context to prove a pet doctrine. Ephesians 2:8-9 only proves that

salvation is “the gift of God” not that regeneration precedes faith. And Philippians 1:29, while convincing many (including me) that faith is a gift, has nothing to say about this subject.

All these passages are being misused to support effectual calling and regeneration before faith. I don't see how a dispensationalist can countenance such a practice. However, there are two passages which seem to hold out more promise for 5 pointers: Colossians 2:12 & Ephesians 2:1-5.

In Colossians 2:12 the faith spoken of is faith in God's power in the resurrection of His Son (“through faith in the working of God”). Verse 13 shows that God makes us alive [regeneration] *after* forgiving us our sins [justification]. Unless one is to teach a doctrine of justification before faith it is well to put faith before God's forgiving us our sins on the basis of Christ's atonement.

So we come again to Ephesians 2:1f. “You He has made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins...” etc. Notice the “deadness” is qualified by the moral degradation of the sinner, “in trespasses and sins.” Thus, it is a moral deadness; it is still very active. Moreover, it is knowingly disobedient. To put it in the language of Romans, they are “without excuse.” Or to use Jesus' own analogy, they “love darkness rather than [in preference to] light.” The first verse is stating that God's regenerating power brings the spiritually corrupt (“dead”) to new life, but it says nothing about regeneration prior to faith; nor indeed irresistible grace. Verse 5 tells us “by grace we are saved,” and verse 8 says it is “through faith.” Thus, grace saves us through faith. If someone wants to teach irresistible grace from this passage they are going to have to pad out their exegesis with a lot of inferences. But from where do they collect their data? These are their proof-texts! And they do not support the definitions we cited above from the Westminster Confession and John Murray.

No, the support comes from a pre-fabricated theology which is then read into the passages (sometimes wildly) regardless of how the original authors employed them.

### **Another Text: 1 John 5:1**

There is one more verse which comes closer than any to teaching regeneration before faith. The verse reads:

“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is [has been] born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him.”

The question is whether “has been born of God” (perfect passive) refers to the way a person *comes to believe* “that Jesus is the Christ”, or whether it refers to a Christian's present continuing state in relation to the true confession of Christ in opposition to those who deny that He came in the flesh (e.g. 4:2-6, 13-15). This latter view fits John's themes far better (see also 2:29; 3:9; 5:13, 20). The trouble for 5 pointers is that the verse clearly can be interpreted well enough without requiring the interpreter to adopt a Reformed *ordo salutis*. At best it might be compared to the way dispensationalists use Revelation 3:10 to teach a pre-trib rapture. It is not decisive. Indeed, I would argue that it is less decisive than the common interpretation I have given.

