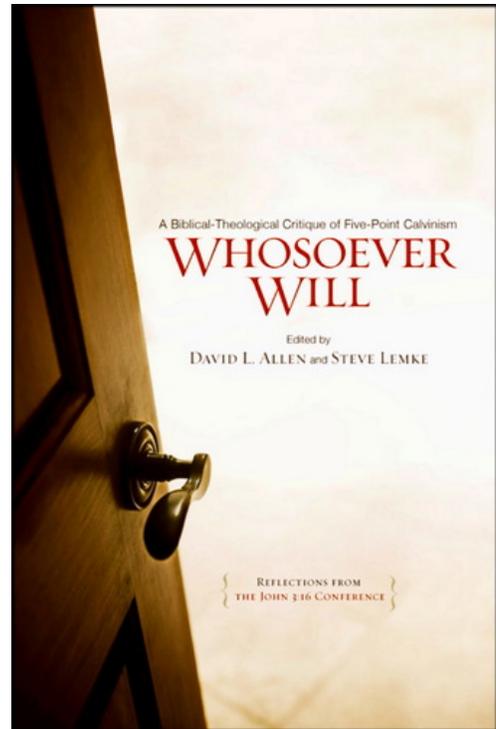


The Background of the Issue

The doctrine of irresistible grace was addressed most famously at the Dutch Reformed Synod of Dort, which offered a response to the concerns voiced by the Remonstrants, who were themselves Dutch Reformed Calvinists. This difference of opinion was echoed in Baptist history in the distinction between General Baptists (who generally agreed with the Remonstrants on these points) and Particular Baptists (who generally agreed with the Synod of Dort on these points). While both the Remonstrants and the Dortians agreed that humans are all depraved and totally helpless to save themselves apart from God’s grace, they mainly argued whether God’s grace is resistible. In Articles III and IV of their “remonstrance” (or statement of concerns), the Remonstrants expressed their conviction that some of their fellow Calvinists had become so extreme in their beliefs that they had departed from scriptural teachings. In particular, while affirming that salvation comes only by God’s grace, the Remonstrants were concerned about the teaching that God forces His grace on sinners irresistibly. The Remonstrants affirmed:



That this grace of God is the beginning, continuance, and accomplishment of all good, even to this extent, that the regenerate man himself, without prevenient or assisting, awakening, following and cooperative grace, can neither think, will, nor do good, nor withstand any temptations to evil; so that all good deeds or movements, that can be conceived, must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. But respects the mode of the operation of this grace, it is not irresistible; inasmuch as it is written concerning many, that they have resisted the Holy Ghost. Acts 7, and elsewhere in many places.¹

In other words, the Remonstrants taught that the only way for anyone to be saved is for God’s grace to come before, during, and after justification because even the best-intentioned human being can “neither think, will, nor do good” apart from God’s grace.² They even went so far as to say that all good in “any way that can be conceived must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ.”³ But the question is, Why is this saving grace of God not appropriated or experienced by all persons? Has God failed in some way? Does God not truly love all persons? Does God not desire the salvation of all persons? No. The Remonstrants refused to blame this failure on God but rightfully assigned this failure to the rebellion and resistance of fallen human beings. God created human beings with the free will either to cooperate with God and receive His grace or to reject finally God’s gracious gift. Again, human beings would

have no salvation at all apart from the grace of God; but God refuses to actualize that salvation in the life of anyone who continually resists God’s grace, refuses to humbly receive it, and finally rejects it.

The Synod of Dort, however, strenuously objected to the Remonstrants’ denial of irresistible grace:

Who teach that the grace by which we are converted to God is nothing but a gentle persuasion, or (as others explain it) that the way of God’s acting in man’s conversion that is most noble and suited to human nature is that which happens by persuasion, and that nothing prevents this grace of moral suasion even by itself from making natural men spiritual; indeed, that God does not produce the assent of the will except in this manner of moral suasion, and that the effectiveness of God’s work by which it surpasses the work of Satan consists in the fact that God promises eternal benefits while Satan promises temporal ones.

[...]

Who teach that God in regenerating man does not bring to bear that power of his omnipotence whereby he may powerfully and unfailingly bend man’s will to faith and conversion, but that even when God has accomplished all the works of grace which he uses for man’s conversion, man nevertheless can, and in actual fact often does, so resist God and the Spirit in their intent and will to regenerate him, that man completely thwarts his own rebirth; and, indeed, that it remains in his own power whether or not to be reborn.⁴

The Problem of Defining Irresistible Grace

The term “irresistible grace,” then, came initially as a view denied by the Remonstrants and defended by the Dortian Calvinists. The Synod of Dort rejected the notion that God’s grace was limited to His exerting strong moral persuasion on sinners by the Holy Spirit to lead them to salvation. They also rejected the notion that a person can “resist God and the Spirit in their intent and will to regenerate him.”⁵ Instead, the Dort statement asserted that God brings to bear the “power of his omnipotence whereby he may powerfully and unfailingly bend man’s will to faith and conversion.”⁶

In order to understand how Calvinists say that God effects irresistible grace, one must understand the important distinction they draw between what is variously known as the “general” or “outward” call from the “special,” “inward,” “effectual,” or “serious” call. Steele, Thomas, and Quinn virtually equate the “efficacious call” with irresistible grace, based on this distinction between these proposed two different callings from God:

The gospel invitation extends a call to salvation to every one who hears its message. . . . But this outward general call, extended to the elect and the non-elect alike, will not bring sinners to Christ. . . . Therefore, the *Holy Spirit*, in order to bring God’s elect to salvation, extends to them a *special inward call* in addition to the outward call contained in the gospel message. Through this special call the Holy Spirit performs a work of grace within the sinner which inevitably brings him to faith in Christ. . . .

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! The Spirit is in no way dependent upon their help or cooperation for success in His work of bringing them to Christ. It is for this reason that Calvinists speak of the Spirit’s call and of God’s grace in saving sinners as being “efficacious,” “invincible,” or “irresistible.” For the grace which the Holy Spirit extends to the elect cannot be thwarted or refused, it never fails to bring them to true faith in Christ!⁷

As this statement indicates, some contemporary Calvinists seem to be a little embarrassed by the term “irresistible grace” and have sought to soften it or to replace it with a term like “effectual calling.” They also object when others criticize that “irresistible grace” suggests that God forces persons to do things against their wills. Instead, they insist, God merely woos and persuades. Calvinists thus sometimes sound disingenuous in affirming a strong view of irresistible grace while simultaneously softening the language about it to make it more palatable. For example, John Piper and the Bethlehem Baptist Church staff affirm that irresistible grace “means the Holy Spirit can overcome all resistance and make his influence irresistible. . . . The doctrine of irresistible grace means that God is sovereign and can overcome all resistance when he wills.”⁸ Yet, just a few paragraphs later, they affirm that “irresistible grace never implies that God forces us to believe against our will. . . . On the contrary, irresistible grace is compatible with preaching and witnessing that tries to persuade people to do what is reasonable and what will accord with their own best interests.”⁹ No attempt is made in the article to reconcile these apparently contradictory assertions.

Likewise, R. C. Sproul argues at great length that John 6:44 (“No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” HCSB) does not refer merely to the necessity that God “woo or entice men to Christ,” and humans can “resist this wooing” and “refuse the enticement.”¹⁰ In philosophical language, Sproul says, this wooing is a necessary but not sufficient condition for salvation “because the wooing does not, in fact, guarantee that we will come to Christ.”¹¹ Sproul states that such an interpretation is “incorrect” and “does violence to the text of Scripture.”¹² Instead, Sproul insists, the term “draw” is “a much more forceful concept than to woo,” and means “to compel by irresistible superiority.”¹³

However, in discussing irresistible grace, Sproul tells of a student who, hearing a lecture on predestination by John Gerstner, rejected it. When Gerstner asked the student how he defined Calvinism, the student described it as the perspective that “God forces some people to choose Christ and prevents other people from choosing Christ.” Gerstner then said, “If that is what a Calvinist is, then you can be sure that I am not a Calvinist either.”¹⁴ Sproul likewise chastised a Presbyterian seminary president for rejecting the Calvinist doctrine that “God brings some people, kicking and screaming against their wills, into the kingdom.” Sproul describes this Presbyterian theologian’s view as “a gross misconception of his own church’s theology,” as a “caricature,” and “as far away from Calvinism as one could possibly get.”¹⁵ So which way is it? If God compels persons with “irresistible superiority,” in what way is it inaccurate to say that God is forcing people to choose Christ?

The Synod of Dort insisted that such attempts at moral persuasion of unsaved persons was wasted time. That God’s grace was resistible and not merely the use of strong moral persuasion was *precisely* what the Synod of Dort rejected and the Remonstrants affirmed. The Remonstrants insisted that the compelling grace of God persuaded the lost to receive Christ as Lord and Savior. The Synod of Dort insisted that this was not going far enough. Note their explicit denial that a person can “resist” God. Note the use in the Synod of Dort language of divine omnipotence, which can “powerfully and unfailingly bend man’s will to faith and conversion.”¹⁶ Bending the will of a fallible being by an omnipotent Being powerfully and unfailingly is not merely sweet persuasion. It is forcing one to change one’s mind against one’s will.

Calvinists often describe their position as *monergism* as opposed to *synergism*. In monergism, God works entirely alone, apart from any human role. In synergism, on the other hand, humans cooperate with God in some way in actualizing their own conversion. None of us non-Pelagians would affirm for a minute that we can achieve salvation apart from God. The question is whether humans have any role at all in accepting or receiving their own salvation. On the one hand, the Calvinists say, “No! Your salvation is monergistic, provided only by the grace of God.” When a critic says this response means that God imposes irresistible grace against a person’s will or that humans do not have a choice in the matter, the Calvinists protest that they are being misunderstood and caricatured.

When challenged that irresistible grace goes against someone’s will, most Calvinists reply that it is not against a person’s will at all. God changes their will through regeneration invincibly, such that the person is irresistibly drawn to Christ. Calvinists call this willing, which is externally driven, *compatibilist volition*, as opposed to the more common view, libertarian freedom. In *libertarian freedom* a person does not have absolute freedom (a frequent Calvinist stereotype), but the person chooses between at least two alternatives. In every case a person could have, at least hypothetically, chosen something else. But in

compatibilism, people always choose their greatest desire. They have no alternative choice but to will to do what they want to do. So when God changes their will through irresistible grace or enabling grace, they really have no choice. They will what God has programmed them to will. So the Calvinist system advocates both monergism (God is the only actor) and compatibilism (they go along with what God wants them to do after He changes their will through preconversion regeneration).

The problem is that Calvinists cannot have their cake and eat it, too. They cannot insist that an omnipotent God overwhelms and bends human will powerfully and unfailingly, and then transform this doctrine into something other than it is by softening it with more palatable language such as “effectual calling” and “compatibilism.” The effectual calling means precisely the same thing as irresistible grace. Effectual calling just sounds nicer. At the end of the day, people have no choice but to do what God has programmed them to do. Nonetheless, Calvinists often attempt to sidestep criticism by asserting that the doctrine has been misunderstood, even when non-Calvinists have quoted or paraphrased what Calvinists themselves have said in describing their own doctrine.

For example, at the “Building Bridges” conference, Nathan Finn chastised Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary professor Roy Fish for the following description of irresistible grace, which Finn described as a “stereotype” and a “misunderstanding” of the doctrine:

The “I” in the TULIP is what is called irresistible grace. That means that people who are going to be saved have no other option. They really don’t have a choice. The grace of God cannot be resisted. They cannot resist this special saving grace.¹⁷

A line-by-line study of Fish’s description reveals that Calvinists define irresistible grace in virtually the same words:

Roy Fish: (Irresistible grace) “means that people who are going to be saved have no other option. They really don’t have a choice.”

- The Synod of Dort: “And this is the regeneration, the new creation, the raising from the dead, and the making alive so clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures, which God *works in us without our help*. But this certainly does not happen only by outward teaching, by moral persuasion, or by such a way of working that, after God has done his work, it remains in man’s power whether or not to be reborn or converted. Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work. . . . As a result, all those in whose hearts God works in this marvelous way are *certainly, unfailingly*, and effectively reborn and do actually believe. . . .”¹⁸
- James White: “The doctrine of ‘irresistible grace’ . . . is simply the belief that when God chooses to move in the lives of His elect and bring them from spiritual death to

spiritual life, *no power in heaven or on earth can stop Him from so doing*. . . . It is simply the confession that when God chooses to raise His people to spiritual life, He does so without the fulfillment of any conditions on the part of the sinner. Just as Christ had the power and authority to raise Lazarus to life *without obtaining his ‘permission’ to do so*, He is able to raise His elect to spiritual life with just as certain a result.”¹⁹

- David Steele, Curtis Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn: “The Holy Spirit extends a special inward call that *inevitably* brings them to salvation. . . . [T]he internal call (which is made only to the elect) *cannot be rejected*. It always results in conversion. By means of this special call the Spirit *irresistibly* draws sinners to Christ. He is not limited in His work of applying salvation by man’s will, nor is He dependent upon man’s cooperation for success. . . . God’s grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.”²⁰

Roy Fish: “The grace of God cannot be resisted. They cannot resist this special saving grace.”

- The Synod of Dort: The Synod rejects that . . . “God in regenerating man does not bring to bear that power of his omnipotence whereby he may powerfully and unfailingly *bend man’s will* to faith and conversion. . . .” (The Synod *rejects that someone*) “*can, and in actual fact often does, so resist God* and the Spirit in their intent and will to regenerate him.”²¹
- John Piper: Irresistible grace “means the Holy Spirit can *overcome all resistance* and make his influence *irresistible*. . . . The doctrine of irresistible grace means that God is sovereign and can *overcome all resistance* he wills. . . . When God undertakes to fulfill his sovereign purpose, *no one can successfully resist him*. . . . When a person hears a preacher call for repentance he can resist that call. But if God gives him repentance he cannot resist because the gift is *the removal of resistance*. . . . So if God gives repentance it is the same as *taking away the resistance*. *This is why we call this work of God ‘irresistible grace.’*”²²

Was Fish reflecting the statements of some Calvinists in his definition? Distinguishing Fish’s from Finn’s is so difficult that one must ask, What exactly is it in Fish’s description that Finn objects to so strenuously? Fish has echoed Calvinist descriptions of irresistible grace, and yet Finn takes him to task for doing so. No matter how modern-day Calvinists may attempt to gloss over the hardness of irresistible grace and project it in a softer, gentler light, the doctrine remains what it is. When pressed by their own words, Calvinists sometimes seem to play word games or equivocate their words in order to make their beliefs more palatable. However, this study will examine irresistible grace as it is described and defined in standard Calvinist doctrinal teachings.

The Bible and Irresistible Grace

What does the Bible say about irresistible grace? The easy answer is that the Bible does not specifically address irresistible grace. The phrase “irresistible grace” does not appear anywhere in Scripture. Of course, this absence alone does not mean that irresistible grace might not be a reality. Other doctrines such as the Trinity are described in Scripture but not with the theological name that we now give them. So what does the Bible say about grace being irresistible?

Key Texts Affirming Resistible Grace

Some Scripture texts appear to deny irresistible grace or to affirm resistible grace explicitly. Proverbs 1 challenges the notion of irresistible grace. The wisdom of God personified speaks to those whom “I have called” (Prov 1:24 NASB), to whom “I will pour out my spirit on you” (Prov 1:23b), and to whom wisdom has made “my words known to you” (Prov 1:23c). Nevertheless, no one regarded God’s truth, for the hearers refused God’s message and disdained Wisdom’s counsel (Prov 1:22–26).

Some might claim that this message merely exemplifies the resistible outward call. The problem becomes complicated because these are God’s elect people, the Jews, with whom God had entered into covenant: “I called and you refused” (Prov 1:24a NASB). God makes them the offer: “I will pour out my spirit on you” (Prov 1:23b), but they would not “turn” and instead “refused” to accept the message (Prov 1:24). The grace that was so graciously offered was ungraciously refused. The proffered grace was conditional on their response. Acceptance of God’s Word would have brought blessing, but their rejection of it now brings calamity upon themselves.

In the prophets and the Psalms, God responds to the Israelites’ refusal to repent and their rejection of the Word of God:

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son. As they called them, so they went from them; they sacrificed to the Baals, and burned incense to carved images. I taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by their arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love, and I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them. He shall not return to the land of Egypt; but the Assyrian shall be his king, because they refused to repent. And the sword shall slash in his cities, devour his districts, and consume them, because of their own counsels. My people are bent on backsliding from Me. Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt Him. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboim? My heart churns within Me; My

sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man, the Holy One in your midst; and I will not come with terror” (Hos 11:1–9 NKJV).

They did not keep the covenant of God; they refused to walk in His law (Ps 78:10 NKJV).

“But My people would not heed My voice, and Israel would have none of Me. So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels. Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways!” (Ps 81:11–13 NKJV).

“They have turned their backs to Me and not their faces. Though I taught them time and time again, they do not listen and receive discipline” (Jer 32:33 HCSB).

In the New Testament the most direct reference to the resistibility of grace is in Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7:2–53, just before his martyrdom in Acts 7:54–60. In confronting the Jews who had rejected Jesus as Messiah, Stephen said, “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did” (Acts 7:51 NASB). The Remonstrants referenced this specific Scripture, and most scholars who reject the notion of irresistible grace cite it. Stephen is not speaking to believers but to Jews who have rejected Christ. He not only accuses them of “resisting the Holy Spirit” but many of their Jewish ancestors for resisting God as well. The word translated as “resist” (*antiptō* in Greek) means not “to fall down and worship,” but to “oppose,” “strive against,” or “resist.”²³ Clearly this Scripture teaches that the influence of the Holy Spirit is resistible. A similar account in Luke 7:30 describes the Pharisees’ response to the preaching of John the Baptist: “But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him” (Luke 7:30 KJV).

Another example of resistance occurs in Paul’s salvation experience in Acts 26. As Saul was going down the Damascus road to persecute Christians, a blinding light hit him, and a voice out of heaven said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14 HSCB). Obviously, Saul had resisted the conviction of the Holy Spirit in events such as the stoning of Stephen, but now God broke through Saul’s resistance in a dramatic way. Even so, some time lapsed before Ananias arrived and Paul received the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17).

What do Calvinists say about these texts? First of all, Calvinists do not deny that persons can resist the Holy Spirit in some situations. Unbelievers can resist the mere “outward call” of the gospel, and believers can resist the Holy Spirit as well. As John Piper has said, “What is irresistible is when the Spirit is issuing the effectual call.”²⁴ However, these explanations do not appear to help in this instance. The Jews, after all, were God’s chosen people, and the entirety of the Jewish people were covered under the covenant, not just individual Jews.

Calvinist covenantal theology sees the entire nation of Israel as being God’s chosen people. The elect, after all, are supposed to receive the effectual call. Calvinists often quote, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated” (Rom 9:13 HCSB), as their strongest evidence for election.²⁵ But these divinely elected people have not only rejected Jesus as Messiah but resisted the Holy Spirit through many generations in history. Therefore, it would seem that God’s grace is resistible, even among the elect who are eligible to receive the effectual call.

Resistible Grace in the Ministry and Teachings of Jesus

Throughout His teaching ministry, Jesus taught and ministered in ways that seem to be inconsistent with the notion of irresistible grace. In each of these occasions, Jesus appears to advocate the idea that God’s grace is resistible. For example, hear again Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem! The city who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, yet you were not willing!” (Matt 23:37 HCSB, cf. Luke 13:34). What was Jesus lamenting? He was lamenting that despite God’s gracious love for Jerusalem and desire to gather them to eternal security under His protection, and the many prophets and messengers He sent them with His message, they rejected the message that was sent them and they “were not willing” to respond to God. In fact, the Greek sets the contrast off even more sharply than the English does because forms of the same Greek verb *thelo* (to will) are used twice in this verse: “I willed . . . but you were not willing.”²⁶ Schrenk describes this statement as expressing “the frustration of His gracious purpose to save by the refusal of men.”²⁷ Note also that His lament concerns the entire city of Jerusalem, not just a small number of elect within Jerusalem. Indeed, Jesus is concerned about not only the persons living in Jerusalem at that particular time but for many generations of Jerusalemites.

Again, one might suggest that the prophets were merely the vehicles for proclaiming the general call, and thus these Jerusalemites never received the efficacious call, but this argument will not do. First of all, these are God’s chosen people. As the elect, they should have received the efficacious call, but, in fact, they were still unwilling to respond. Some Calvinists might make this argument: the election of Israel included individuals within Israel, not all of Israel as a people. That only a remnant of physical Israel, not all of it, will be saved has the strongest backing, but the proposal that God sent the efficacious call to just a portion of Israel nevertheless does not match up well with this text or numerous other texts. Even so, the greater issue is that if Jesus believed in irresistible grace, with both the outward and inward calls, His apparent lament over Jerusalem would have been just a disingenuous act, a cynical show because He knew that God had not and would not give these lost persons the necessary conditions for their salvation. His lament would have been over God’s hardness of heart, but that lament is not what the Scripture says. Scripture attributes the people’s not coming to God to their own unwillingness, that is, the hardness of their own hearts.

What is generalized in Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem is personalized in the incident with the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18–23). The ruler asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18 HCSB). If Jesus were a Calvinist, one might have expected Him to answer, “Nothing!” and admonish the young ruler for the impertinence of his question, particularly the idea that he could do anything to inherit eternal life. Instead, Jesus tells him what he could do: he could go and sell all his possessions and give them to the poor. Of course, this instruction was not just about the young ruler’s money; it was about his heart. He loved his money and the privileges it gave him, and he just could not live without it. In other words, Jesus would not grant him eternal life unless he was willing to make a total commitment of his life to God, but the young ruler was unwilling. Jesus let him walk away and face the solemn consequences of his decision. Noting the rich young ruler’s unwillingness, Jesus then comments about how hard it is for a rich person to enter into heaven—indeed, as hard as a camel going through the eye of a needle (Luke 13:24–28). This instruction provoked the disciples to point out that they had sacrificed much to follow Him so that He promised them a significant reward for their efforts (Luke 18:28–30).

Of course, if Jesus were a Calvinist, He never would have suggested that it was harder for rich persons to be saved by God’s irresistible grace than poor persons. Their wills would be changed immediately and invincibly upon hearing God’s effectual call. It would be no harder for a rich person to be saved by God’s monergistic and irresistible calling than it would be for any other sinner. But the real Jesus was suggesting that their salvation was tied in some measure to their response and commitment to His calling.

The same idea of resistible grace arises frequently in the parables of Jesus’ teaching ministry. In the parable of the two sons (Matt 21:28–32), Jesus describes their differing responses. One son initially refuses to do the work he was told to do, saying “I don’t want to,” but later “changed his mind” and did it (Matt 21:29 HCSB). Meanwhile, the other son says he will do the work, but later he does not do the work (Matt 21:29). One ought not to stretch a parable into an allegory, so what was the main point of this parable? The point was that tax collectors and prostitutes were going to enter into the kingdom of heaven before the chief priests and elders who resisted His teaching (Matt 21:31). Note that the distinction between the two was not that one was a son and one was not, for they both were sons from whom the father desired obedience. The distinction is the response of each son—resistance from one, repentance and obedience from the other.

A similar teaching follows in the parable of the vineyard (Matt 21:33–44). Using the familiar Old Testament symbol of a vineyard to represent Israel, Jesus told of the owner of the vineyard going away and leaving it in the hands of the tenants. He sends back a series of messengers and finally his own son to instruct the tenants about running the vineyard, but they reject each messenger and kill his son in the hope of seizing the vineyard for themselves.

The owner then returns and exacts a solemn punishment on the rebellious tenants. Jesus then speaks of the cornerstone, the rock that was rejected by the builders but became the chief cornerstone, obviously speaking of Himself (Matt 21:42–44). Jesus then told the Pharisees that the kingdom of God would be taken from them and “given to a nation producing its fruit” (Matt 21:43 HCSB). Again, the key differential was whether persons were willing to be responsive to the Word of God.

The parable of the Sower (or of the Soils) in Matt 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; and Luke 8:1–15 highlights the issue of personal responsiveness to the Word of God. The nonvariable element is the seed, which represents the Word of God. The variable factor is the receptiveness of the soil on which the sower sows the seed. The seed on the path, on the rocky ground, and among the thorns never becomes rooted enough in the soil to flourish. The seed on the path is snatched away by the evil one. The rocky ground represents the person who “hears the word” and “receives it with joy” (Matt 13:20 HSCB) but does not flourish because “he has no root in himself” (Matt 13:21 HSCB). The seed that falls among thorns represents the person who also hears the Word of God, but the message becomes garbled by worldly interests. Only the seed that falls on good, receptive ground flourishes. Again, the variable is not the proclamation of the Word but the *response* of the individual.

The All-Inclusive Invitations in Scripture

One of the most frequently repeated themes throughout many genres of Scripture is the broad invitation of God to “all” people. This invitation parallels in many ways Dr. David Allen’s discussion on the issue of a limited atonement. The main intuition that differs between Calvinists and others in this regard is why some come to salvation and many do not. The Calvinists essentially blame God for those who do not come. While they would insist, of course, that the sinners who rejected the message of salvation were merely receiving their just deserts, there is really more to it than that. Calvinists say that God elected some to glory for His own reasons from before the world began, and He gave them irresistible grace through His Spirit so they inevitably would be saved. Obviously, those whom He did not choose did not receive the irresistible effectual call but merely the resistible outer ineffectual call. The alternative perspective is that God does extend the general call to all persons and unleashes the Holy Spirit to persuade and convict them of their need for repentance and faith. The Holy Spirit, however, does not impose His will irresistibly. So at the end of the day, response to the grace of God determines whether the call is effectual.

The key issue, then, is whether salvation is genuinely open to all persons or merely just to a few who receive irresistible grace. What does the Scripture say concerning this issue? First of all, Scripture clearly teaches that God desires the salvation of all people. The Bible teaches that:

“He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2 NASB).

“It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish” (Matt 18:14 NASB).

God “is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9 KJV).

God “wants everyone to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4 HSCB).

The Greek word *pas*, meaning “all” or “everyone,” which is found in 1 Tim 2:4 and in 2 Pet 3:9, in all the standard Greek dictionaries means “all”!²⁸

Those who would like to translate the word *pas* as something other than a synonym for “all” should ponder the theological cost of such a move merely because it disagrees with their theological system. For example, Paul uses the same term in 2 Tim 3:16, when he declares that “*all* Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim 3:16 KJV). He does not mean that God inspires merely some selected portions of Scripture but that God inspires all Scripture. Likewise, the Greek word *pas* (“all”), used in the prologue to John, makes the enormous claim about creation that “*all* things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3 KJV). Jesus was not involved in merely creating a few trees and hills here and there, but all things were created by Him. We see the word again in Ephesians when Paul looks toward the eschaton and claims that in the fullness of time will be gathered “*all* things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth” (Eph 1:10 KJV). Thus, an accurate doctrine of the creation of the world, the inspiration of Scripture, and the consummation of the world hinge on an accurate rendering of the Greek word *pas* as “all.” So does the doctrine of salvation—that God desires the salvation of all people and has made an atonement through Christ that is sufficient for all people.

This same all-inclusive Greek word *pas* (translated as “everyone,” “all,” or “whosoever”) is used repeatedly in the New Testament to offer an invitation to all people who would respond to God’s gracious initiative with faith and obedience (italics in the following Scripture passages are mine):

“Therefore *whoever* (*pas, hostis*) hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt 7:24 NKJV; see Luke 6:47).

“*Whosoever* (*pas hostis*) therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But *whosoever* (*hostis an*) shall deny me before men,

him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven” (Matt 10:32–33 KJV; see Luke 12:8).

“Come to Me, *all (pantes)* who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28 NASB; see Luke 7:37).

John the Baptist “came as a witness, to testify about the light, so that *all (pantes)* might believe through him” (John 1:7 HCSB).

Jesus is the true Light “who gives light to *everyone*” (*panta*) (John 1:9 HCSB).

“*Whoever (pas)* believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that *whoever (pas)* believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:15–16 NKJV).

“*Everyone (pas)* who drinks of this water will thirst again; but *whoever (hos an)* drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life” (John 4:13–14 NASB).

“For this is the will of My Father, that *everyone (pus)* who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:40 NASB).

“*Everyone (pus)* who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:26 NASB).

“I have come as Light into the world, so that *everyone (pus)* who believes in Me will not remain in darkness” (John 12:46 NASB).

“And it shall be that *everyone (pus, hos un)* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21 NASB).

“Of Him [Jesus] *all (pantes)* the prophets bear witness that through His name *everyone (puntu)* who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43 NASB).

“As it is written: ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and *whoever (pus)* believes on Him will not be put to shame’ ” (Rom 9:33 NKJV).

“For the Scripture says, ‘*Whoever (pus)* believes in Him will not be disappointed’ ” (Rom 10:11 NASB).

“*Whoever (pus)* denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:23 NASB).

“*Whoever (pus)* believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and *whoever* loves the Father loves the child born of Him” (1 John 5:1 NASB).

Many more of these broad invitations are found throughout Scripture. In addition, the New Testament often uses a form of *hostis*, which when combined with *un* or *eun* is an indefinite relative pronoun best translated as “anyone,” “whosoever,” or “everyone” and refers to the group as a whole, with a focus on each individual member of the group.²⁹

An All-Inclusive Invitation in the Prophets In the famous prophecy of Joel, this prophet comments on whom God delivers:

And it shall come to pass, that *whosoever* shall call on the name of the LORD shall be delivered: for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the LORD hath said, and in the remnant whom the LORD shall call (Joel 2:32 KJV).

Note that the “whosoever” (translated “everyone” in NASB and HCSB) is seen as consonant with “the remnant whom the Lord shall call.” These are not two distinct groups but are one and the same.

All-Inclusive Invitations Offered by Jesus

Jesus offered this all-inclusive invitation in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout His teaching ministry. One might note that Jesus does not say “whoso-elect” in these invitations; the invitation is always addressed to “whosoever”:³⁰

“And blessed is he, *whosoever* (*hos ean*) shall not be offended in me” (Matt 11:6 KJV; see Luke 7:23).

“For *whosoever* (*hostis an*) shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Matt 12:50 KJV; c.f. Mark 3:35).

“If *any* man (*tis*) will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For *whosoever* (*hos an*) will save his life shall lose it: and *whosoever* will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt 16:24–25 KJV; c.f. Mark 8:34–35; Luke 9:23–24).

“I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if *anyone* (*ean tis*) eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh” (John 6:51 NASB).

“If *anyone* (*ean tis*) is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself” (John 7:17 NASB).

Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If *anyone* (*ean tis*) is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink” (John 7:37 NASB).

“Truly, truly, I say to you, if *anyone* (*ean tis*) keeps My word he will never see death” (John 8:51 NASB).

All-Inclusive Invitations in the Proclamation and Epistles of the Early Church

“And it shall be that *everyone* (*pas, hos an*) who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21 NASB).

“Of Him [Jesus] all (*pantes*) the prophets bear witness that through His name *everyone* (*panta*) who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins” (Acts 10:43 NASB).

“For *everyone* (*pas hos an*) who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:13 HCSB).

“*Whoever* (*hos an*) confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 John 4:15 NASB).

All-Inclusive Invitations in John’s Revelation

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if *anyone* (*ean tis*) hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev 3:20 NASB).

“And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And *whosoever will*, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev 22:17 KJV).

Overlooking or reinterpreting some of these verses could make them fit within a theological system. But when such a vast array of Scriptures from the various genres of Scripture offers the same all-inclusive invitation over and over again, a point comes when the question must be asked if one’s theological system is doing justice to the biblical text. Is Scripture being shaped to make it agree with one’s theological system, or is one’s theological system being shaped according to Scripture?

Descriptions of How to Be Saved

Another line of evidence in Scripture supports the idea that grace is resistible. Whenever anyone in the New Testament asks a direct question about how to be saved, the answer never refers to election. The answer always calls for an action on the part of the person to receive the salvation that God has provided for and offers to each person. What should we say in the face of such a crowd of witnesses? It would clearly appear the gospel is offered to all those who would respond, not merely to a few select persons who receive effectual grace irresistibly. Several times in the New Testament, formulas from more of a theological perspective are expressed about how to be saved. Several times in the New Testament, salvation formulas are expressed in a variety of wordings. Again, these formulas focus on the desired response of the sinners, not the question of whether they are elect.

The Teachings of Jesus. Jesus directly tied salvation to faith in Him realized through the proclamation of the gospel: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:14–16 NKJV). Therefore, Jesus commissioned His disciples to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15–16 HCSB). *The Invitation at Pentecost.* At the end of the sermon at Pentecost, some of the hearers “were pierced to the heart” and said to Peter and the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37 NASB). Peter’s answer was not, “Are you elect or not?” His answer was, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38 NASB). Even after this, “with many other words he [Peter] solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation!’ ” (Acts 2:40 NASB). Of course, had Peter known that grace was irresistible, he wouldn’t have wasted his time with such a solemn exhortation for fear that those who were hearing only the general call would be confused into being saved.

The Appeal to the Philippian Jailer. Similarly, when the Philippian jailer saw the miraculous intervention of God in releasing Paul and Silas from his jail, he fell at their feet and asked the salvation question in the most direct way possible: “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30 NASB). Paul did not respond by talking about election. Instead, he answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31 NASB).

The Appeal to the Ethiopian Eunuch. After Philip had witnessed to the Ethiopian eunuch from the Old Testament prophecies, the eunuch exclaimed, “ ‘Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?’ And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God’ ” (Acts 8:36–37 NASB). And so he was baptized. Note that his being baptized was conditional upon “if” he believed.

The Teaching of Paul. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. With the heart one believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom 10:9–10 HCSB).

To summarize, the Scriptures contain significant evidence against irresistible grace. The Bible specifically teaches that the Holy Spirit can be resisted. It repeatedly calls upon all people to respond to God’s gracious invitation. The descriptions of how to be saved seem to focus on human response to God’s initiative. The texts do not seem to support irresistible grace, but they call upon persons to respond to the grace of God in specific ways. This is not

to say, of course, that Calvinists cannot reach different interpretations of these texts, based upon their theological presuppositions. It means that the plain sense reading of these texts tends to support the belief that God’s grace, by His own intent and design, is resistible.

A Theological Assessment of Irresistible Grace

What about irresistible grace from a theological perspective? How does irresistible grace fit in with persons from a Baptist heritage? What does the Baptist Faith and Message say about irresistible grace and the other so-called “doctrines of grace”?

The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 and Irresistible Grace

The Bible is our ultimate standard for faith and practice. However, as a Southern Baptist, The Baptist Faith and Message 2000,³¹ the confessional affirmation of the United States of America’s largest Protestant denomination, provides valuable insight about doctrinal issues. What does the BF&M 2000 say about irresistible grace? The term “irresistible grace” does not appear in the BF&M 2000. Furthermore, the BF&M 2000 does not explicitly endorse total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, or irresistible grace, although Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike can point to language in the confession that could support each position. In my understanding, irresistible grace is not supported in the definitions of “salvation,” “regeneration,” and “justification” in Article IV of the BF&M 2000. Salvation “is offered freely to all who *accept* Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.” Regeneration “is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner *responds* in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Justification “is God’s gracious and full acquittal upon principles of His righteousness of *all sinners who repent and believe* in Christ.” The BF&M 2000 explicitly states, “*There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.*” Likewise, the kingdom of God in Article IX is defined as “the realm of salvation *into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ.*”

In addition, the BF&M 2000 holds a high view of human freedom and moral accountability. Article V affirms that God’s election is “*consistent with the free agency of man.*” Article III also affirms that we were endowed at creation with “freedom of choice,” and nowhere in the confession is the removal of this free choice affirmed. Article III twice affirms the creation of all humans in the image of God and also affirms the “sacredness of all human personality.” Article III affirms the age of accountability, that although after Adam humans are all born with a sinful nature into a sinful environment, not until humans “are capable of moral action” do they “become transgressors” and come “under condemnation,”³² thus underscoring human freedom and individual moral accountability. All of these descriptions suggest a human responsiveness to God’s grace, rather than the notion of grace being irresistibly imposed on someone’s will.

Of course, the Baptist Faith and Message often equally affirms that God’s grace initiates and brings about salvation. Baptists believe in justification by grace through faith. The BF&M 2000 teaches that “only the grace of God can bring man into His holy fellowship and enable man to fulfill the creative purpose of God.”³³ It describes regeneration or the new birth as “a work of God’s grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.”³⁴ The BF&M 2000 describes election as “the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners,” and “is the glorious display of God’s sovereign goodness.”³⁵ The Holy Spirit, according to the BF&M 2000, “convicts men of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. He calls men to the Saviour, and effects regeneration. At the moment of regeneration He baptizes every believer into the Body of Christ.”³⁶

The BF&M 2000 does not attempt to relieve the tension between God’s sovereignty and human free will into a neat theological system; it leaves this dynamic tension as we find it in the pages of Scripture. It affirms both a high view of the sovereignty of God and a high view of human free will and moral accountability. It affirms both the necessity (because of human fallenness) for God’s initiative in salvation through His grace, and the necessity that persons must respond to God’s gracious gift of salvation and receive it into their lives.

Seven Theological Concerns About Irresistible Grace

From my perspective, irresistible grace does not square well with a number of doctrines. I will raise a number of questions about the viability of a doctrine of irresistible grace from a Southern Baptist Christian theological perspective. These concerns are addressed primarily to some who go to extremes in Calvinism and do not apply to all Calvinists. If these concerns or criticisms do not pertain to you, then God bless you! It would greatly help if you would be specific and deliberate in distinguishing yourself from these more extreme forms of Calvinism. My primary concern is the trajectory that seems to be emerging in moving from moderate Calvinism to more militant forms of Calvinism. My concern is less where young Calvinists may be now than where they or their followers may be a decade from now. Where are the limits? In the pages that follow, I will raise seven specific theological concerns about the notion of irresistible grace.

1. Irresistible Grace Can Lead to the Denial of the Necessity for Conversion

Some Calvinists understand the effectual call to be grounded in double predestination; therefore, conversion is unnecessary, and infant baptism is affirmed. Because they understand the covenant of God includes children through their parents, personal conversion is not necessary. In fact, this brand of Calvinists bristles at the notion that children from Christian families should be seen as needing to be converted at all. David

Engelsma states, “Speaking for myself, to the brash, presumptuous question sometimes put to me by those of a revivalist, rather than covenantal, mentality, ‘When were you converted?’ I have answered in all seriousness, ‘When was I not converted?’ ”³⁷ He further declares, “As a Reformed minister and parent, I have no interest whatever in conversion as the basis for viewing baptized children as God’s dear children, loved of him from eternity, redeemed by Jesus, and promised the Holy Spirit, the author of faith. None!”³⁸ So from Engelsma’s perspective, children of believers are automatically saved under their parents’ covenant and thus have no need for personal conversion. However, children of unbelievers who die in infancy are reprobate and go to hell.³⁹

Engelsma’s position, although perhaps embarrassing and unpopular among some contemporary Calvinists, is consistent with the teachings of John Calvin himself, as well as affirmations in the Synod of Dort and the Westminster Confession. According to Article 17 in Section I of the Synod of Dort, titled “The Salvation of the Infants of Believers,” the Synod of Dort affirmed, “Since we must make judgments about God’s will from his Word, which testifies that the children of *believers* are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election *and salvation* of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.”⁴⁰ Likewise, section III of chapter X of the Westminster Confession, titled “Of Effectual Calling,” affirms: “Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who works when, and where, and how He pleases: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.”⁴¹

In the perspective of Calvinists such as Engelsma, conversion is an unnecessary add-on because children of believers are covered under the covenant of their parents. The obverse of this doctrine, the eternal damnation of the children of unbelievers, obviously brings with it challenging implications for pastoral ministry. Contemporary outspoken Calvinists such as R. C. Sproul Jr. also affirm that the eternal destiny of infants has nothing to do with their personal decision to accept or reject Christ after the age of accountability. They are already guilty of original sin unless they have been baptized as infants. Therefore, only believers’ children who have experienced infant baptism can be saved. Sproul Jr. chided Billy Graham for his words in comforting the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing (which included many victims from a children’s day care center). Graham said, “Someday there will be a glorious reunion with those who have died and gone to heaven before us, and that includes all those innocent children that are lost. They’re not lost from God because any child that young is automatically in heaven and in God’s arms.”⁴² Sproul Jr. insisted that since we are born guilty of original sin, and infants have no opportunity for justification by faith, they have no real hope of salvation. He accused Graham of advocating “a new gospel— justification by youth alone.”⁴³ Sproul’s article was infamous not only in quickly setting the record for the number

of letters to the editor but also in setting the record for producing not a single letter affirming Sproul’s position.

Baptists have always believed that since infants are not yet capable of actual sin until the age of accountability and since their sinful nature is saved through the atonement, they go to heaven. Humans are not held accountable for their sins until they are morally accountable, and at that point their eternal destiny is decided by their response to God’s initiative of grace, not the spiritual heritage of their parents.

Hopefully, few Calvinistic Baptists are tempted to practice nonconversionist Calvinism in the manner of Engelsma. When Baptists go out of their way to organize fellowship with such Presbyterians rather than fellow Baptists, or when they push to allow people christened as infants into the membership of their own church without believer’s baptism,⁴⁴ or when they speak of public invitations as sinful or as a rejection of the sovereignty of God, seeing much difference between them is difficult.

2. Irresistible Grace Reverses the Biblical Order of Salvation

All major forms of Calvinism (both David Engelsma’s nonconversionist “Old Light Calvinism” and the more popular conversionist/New Light Calvinist perspective) affirm an *ordo salutis*, an order of salvation, which is the foundation upon which the Calvinist theological system is built. One of the key elements of this order of salvation is that regeneration precedes conversion. Fundamental to belief in irresistible grace is the presupposition that all persons are spiritually dead as a result of Adam’s sin, so humans are incapable of responding in any way to the gospel apart from the prior act of being regenerated by the Spirit of God. Calvinists and Arminians agree that only God can raise people to new life; humans cannot save or regenerate themselves. As Calvinist writer James White has acknowledged, “Neither side in the debate will deny that God is the one who raises men to spiritual life.”⁴⁵ So what is the difference? In irresistible grace persons are totally unable to respond at all to God’s grace until the Holy Spirit has totally regenerated them, whereas in the opposing perspective humans can respond to the gracious initiative of God with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Calvinists base much of their teachings on Eph 2:1, that those who are lost are “dead in trespasses and sins.” However, they tend to equate spiritual deadness with physical deadness and do not qualify this spiritual deadness in the light of other descriptions of lostness even in the same chapter. Ephesians 2 also speaks of the lost as “foreigners” and “aliens” (Eph 2:12, 19). Foreigners do not enjoy citizenship and are far from God, but foreigners are still alive. Ephesians 2:1 is further qualified by 1 Cor 1:18 (“the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” NASB), 2 Cor 2:15 (“For to God we are the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” HCSB), and 2 Cor 4:3 (“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing”

NASB). The concept of spiritual deadness is present in all three passages, but the deadness is not yet complete. The lost are perishing but not yet dead. Opportunity remains for a response that can result in a different destiny.

But Calvinists take spiritual deadness as not only the primary metaphor but the literal basis on which they build the rest of their theology superstructure. For example, in a sermon on Ephesians 2, John MacArthur said that “spiritual death is an inability to respond to stimulus.” A sinner “has no capacity to respond to God. . . . Spiritually dead people are like zombies—they don’t know they’re dead and they’re still going through the motions of living.”⁴⁶ Therefore, Calvinists reason, people must be regenerated (spiritually reborn, born again) before they can be alive enough spiritually to respond to God. As John Piper and the staff at Bethlehem Baptist Church affirm, “We do not think that faith precedes and causes new birth. Faith is the evidence that God has begotten us anew.”⁴⁷

Clearly, being saved before believing in Christ is getting “the cart before the horse.” This question can be divided into three questions about which comes first: Regeneration or salvation? Receiving the Holy Spirit or salvation? Salvation or repentance and faith? Many key texts make these issues clear. First, in regard to regeneration preceding faith, R. C. Sproul affirms that “a cardinal point of Reformed theology is the maxim: Regeneration precedes faith. . . . We do not believe in order to be born again; we are born again in order to believe.”⁴⁸ What does the Bible say? Does regeneration (spiritual life, being born again, new birth) come first or does faith?

Jesus told Nicodemus that the Son of Man must be lifted up like Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, “so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life. For God loved the world in this way: He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:15–16 HCSB). Note that proclamation of the gospel comes first, is followed by belief, and then is followed by eternal life.

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36 NASB).

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24 NASB)

In dealing with the Pharisees, Jesus said, “And you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life” (John 5:40 NASB).

“I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (John 6:51 NASB).

So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. . . . As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also *shall live* because of Me” (John 6:53–54,57 NASB).

“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; *he who believes in Me shall live* even if he dies’ ” (John 11:25 NASB). If Jesus thought that regeneration preceded conversion, He would have said that he who is spiritually alive will believe; but what Jesus said is that he who believes will live.

“But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31 NASB). Again, note that it does not say that by having life humans might believe that Jesus is the Christ, but it says believe in order that you might have life.

“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him” (1 John 5:1 NASB).

In each of these cases, faith and salvation clearly precede the new life in Christ.

The second related issue is, When does the Spirit come into a believer’s life? Does the Holy Spirit come into deadened lives before or after conversion? What do the Scriptures say about the order of believing and receiving the Spirit?

“He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:38–39 NASB).

“Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ ” (Acts 2:38 NASB).

“Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father’ ” (Gal 4:6 NASB).

“The purpose was that the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, so that we could receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:13 HCSB). Were the Calvinist perspective correct, we would expect this verse to read, “That we might receive faith through the work of the Spirit.”

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory” (Eph 1:13– 14 NASB).

These texts show that the Spirit and spiritual life do not come into a person’s life fully until after their conversion. Instead, the Holy Spirit convicts and convinces the sinner through enabling or “prevenient” grace, leading and enabling the person to respond in faith, resulting in regeneration, justification, and salvation.⁴⁹

Charles Spurgeon, an evangelistic Calvinist who took issue with more extreme Calvinists, said in a sermon defending Dwight L. Moody’s preaching, “We are all ready to set our seal to the clearest statement that men are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, and saved the moment they believe. We all hold and teach that there is such a thing as conversion, and that when men are converted they become other men than they were before, and a new life begins which will culminate in eternal glory.”⁵⁰ Spurgeon, at least, seemed to teach that conversion preceded “the new life.”

A third related issue is, Which comes first, repentance and faith or regeneration? The Calvinist theologian Loraine Boettner dares to say, “A man is not saved because he believes in Christ; he believes in Christ because he is saved.”⁵¹ Again, what does the Bible say?

Then He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15–16 HCSB).

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name (John 1:12 KJV).

But these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:31 NASB).

“Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39 NIV).

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31 NASB).

Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized (Acts 18:8 NASB).

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom 1:16 NASB).

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. With the heart one believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses, resulting in salvation (Rom 10:9–10 HCSB).

God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (1 Cor 1:21 NASB).

And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Heb 11:6 NASB).

In all these Scriptures, repentance and faith clearly precede regeneration. In addition to these biblical statements, it is difficult to imagine how regeneration preceding faith would function realistically. Some, such as John Piper, suggest that “regeneration and faith are so closely connected that in experience we cannot distinguish them.”⁵² How would regeneration preceding faith play out in real life? Why did the person attend church in the first place? A lost man, according to Calvinists, will not seek God, so he must first be regenerated before he seeks God. But this regeneration would not happen immediately. If he was regenerated on Wednesday and his regenerated will resolved to go to church the following Sunday, then it would be several days before he heard the gospel so he could believe. Perhaps he stumbled into a Unitarian Universalist church on the first Sunday, and it took several Sundays before he heard an authentic gospel message. In other cases he may live in an area where the gospel is not readily accessible to him. Perhaps he will struggle for years about this decision, like C. S. Lewis, who famously struggled for years before coming to Christ. As Lewis described it, he “came into Christianity kicking and screaming” as “the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”⁵³ What if Lewis had been killed in an accident before he came to faith? Is it possible to be among the elect but not saved? Evidently so, for the Westminster Confession asserts that not only are the children of the elect saved without hearing the gospel but also “other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.”⁵⁴

On the other hand, if Piper is right and the two events occur virtually simultaneously, how did it happen that this totally depraved, lost man was seeking Christ? Since he was spiritually dead with a depraved will, his own will could not have impelled him to go to church on Sunday or for many Sundays. Theoretically, this idea sounds good, but it does not make any sense in real life. Instead, we affirm the scriptural order that repentance and faith precede conversion/regeneration/justification, and the new life in the Spirit.

3. Irresistible Grace Could Weaken the Significance of Preaching the Word of God, Evangelism, and Missions

With their strong emphasis on election and regeneration worked directly by the Holy Spirit preceding and without the preaching of the gospel, Calvinism may inadvertently discount the preaching of the Word of God. This challenge may come as a surprise since many Calvinists expound the Word of God well, and Calvinist confessions clearly call for the proclamation of the gospel in the “general call.” But if the primary means of salvation is either as children through infant baptism under the covenant of their parents, or through the Holy Spirit directly regenerating people apart from and prior to the preaching of the gospel, why is preaching that important?

In the same light it also seems that the doctrine of irresistible grace could have a stultifying effect on evangelism and missions.⁵⁵ Is proclamation of the gospel an unnecessary add-on after people have already been saved? If, as Calvinist theologian Loraine Boettner has said, “A man is not saved because he believes in Christ; he believes in Christ because he is saved,”⁵⁶ then why would preaching and evangelism be essential for the furtherance of the gospel? The New Testament seems to put a higher value on the preaching and hearing of the Word of God than this sort of Calvinism allows. From the biblical perspective, preaching the gospel is the primary delivery system for salvation:

For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe (1 Cor 1:21 KJV).

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. And when she and her household had been baptized (Acts 16:13–15 NASB).

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. For you, brethren, . . . also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved (1 Thess 2:1–16 NASB).

For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? . . . So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God (Rom 10:13–15, 17 NKJV).

However, speaking on this passage of Scripture, John Calvin insisted that gospel preaching was not the only way people could be saved:

But they do not consider, that when the apostle makes hearing the source of faith, he only describes the ordinary economy and dispensation of the Lord, which he generally observes in the calling of his people; but does not prescribe a perpetual rule for him, precluding his employment of any other method; which he has certainly employed in the calling of many, to whom he has given the true knowledge of himself in an internal manner, by the illumination of his Spirit, without the intervention of any preaching.⁵⁷

When John Frame answered the question, What doctrines must be believed to be saved?, he was being consistent within his Calvinistic heritage. Frame responded, “None. I hold the Reformed view that children in infancy, even before birth, can be regenerated and saved, presumably before they have any conscious doctrinal beliefs.”⁵⁸ To cite another example, Calvinist theologian Terrance Tiessen proposes that (a) persons can be saved outside of and apart from the church, (b) that genuine revelatory experiences can be had in other world religions that lead to saving faith, (c) that one can be saved without becoming a Christian, (d) that one can be saved without a conscious commitment to Jesus Christ, (e) that since other revelatory and salvific means are available, the missionary mandate is important but not essential to the fulfillment of God’s kingdom, (f) that a child or mentally incompetent person can and must be saved in the same way as a competent adult, and (g) that all the unsaved upon their death will have one last opportunity to accept Christ without any knowledge of Christ.⁵⁹

This approach is defective because it heightens the idea that conscious personal acceptance of the gospel is not essential, and thus it diminishes the role of the preaching of the gospel. Since the New Testament holds preaching in exceptional regard, we ought to take pause when a theological system lessens this value.

Directly connected with the issue of the proclamation of the gospel is a cluster of issues within Calvinism: (a) whether or not the gospel should be preached “promiscuously” to all people, (b) whether the “well-meant offer” or “free offer” of the gospel should be made to all persons, and (c) should public invitations be offered? These questions flow directly from the font of the Synod of Dort:

Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel.⁶⁰

Challenging the phrase about preaching the gospel “to all persons promiscuously” is tempting since in modern English doing something promiscuously suggests the idea of doing something inappropriate or violating the rules. But the root idea of the word is to preach “without differentiation,” in this case between the elect and the non-elect.

The question of whether the “well-meant offer” of the gospel should, indeed, be offered is a controversial point among Calvinists. David Engelsma has defined “the well-meant offer” as the conception, or doctrine, of the preaching of the blessed gospel in Calvinistic circles that holds that God sends the gospel to all who hear out of an attitude of grace to them all and with a desire to save them all. The ‘well-meant offer’ insists, at the very least, on these two notions: God is gracious in the preaching to all hearers; and God has a will, or sincere desire, for the salvation of every man who hears the gospel.⁶¹

The Protestant Reformed Churches of which Engelsma is a part, while affirming that the gospel is to be preached to everyone and denying that it should be preached only to the elect, “deny that the preaching of the gospel is grace to all who hear it.”⁶² In answer to the question, Is Jesus Christ gracious in the gospel to all who hear the preaching?, “the answer of the PRC is an unqualified, emphatic ‘no!’ Neither is there a gracious operation of the Spirit of Christ upon the heart of the reprobate who hears the preaching, nor is there a gracious attitude in the Father of Jesus Christ toward the reprobate who comes under the preaching.”⁶³ The PRC is aghast at their fellow Calvinists who make the well-meant offer; indeed, Engelsma alleges that “the entire, massive weight of the Canons [of Dort] comes down on the side of the denial of the offer and against ‘the well-meant offer,’ ” that making the offer is evidence of “the apostasy of Reformed churches from the great creedal doctrines of sovereign, particular grace,” thus leading to the consequence that “the Canons of Dordt are in error.”⁶⁴ To Engelsma, “the doctrine of the ‘well-meant offer’ will drive out the doctrine of predestination,”⁶⁵ and amounts to an affirmation of Arminianism:

We charge, in dead earnest, that the offer is the Arminian view of gospel-preaching. . . . This doctrine of preaching was fundamental to the entire Arminian theology. . . . On the Arminian view of preaching, there cannot be a decree of predestination in God excluding any from salvation. And if there is no decree of predestination, as confessed by Reformed orthodoxy, neither is there any of the other of “the five points of Calvinism.” The PRC see the “well-meant offer” of professing Calvinists as identical with the Arminian doctrine of preaching in at least two basic respects: grace for all in the gospel of Christ and a divine will for the salvation of all. It is incontrovertible that the offer teaches—does not imply, but teaches—that God’s grace in the preaching is resistible, and resisted, and that God’s will for the salvation of sinners is frustrated. Many towards whom grace is directed in the preaching successfully refuse it; and many whom God desires to save perish.⁶⁶

If the concession were made that the well-meant offer is truly a gracious offer, Engelsma argues, Calvinists should acknowledge that “the Arminians were right,” and should “renounce Dordt.”⁶⁷ As he says, “Let us call a worldwide Reformed synod, preferably at Dordt, in order to rescind the condemnation of Arminianism and in order to make humble confession of our fathers’ sins against Arminius, Episcopius, and the others!”⁶⁸

Without engaging in this internecine discussion within Calvinism, I will suggest three observations: (1) If these Calvinist doctrines lead Calvinists to extensive debates on these issues, something must be wrong with their doctrines; (2) the heated rhetoric some Calvinists use against evangelistic invitations does nothing but heighten these concerns;⁶⁹ and (3) if some Calvinist views are taken seriously, it could lead to diminishing a vital approach to preaching, evangelism, and missions.

4. Irresistible Grace Creates Questions About the Character of God, Particularly Regarding the Problem of Evil

In several ways the notion of irresistible grace creates questions about the character of God. First, the two callings (the outward and inward, effectual and ineffectual, serious and not serious callings) correspond to two apparently contradictory wills within God (the revealed and secret wills of God). The revealed will of God issues for the Great Commission that the gospel should be preached to all nations, but the secret will is that only a small group of elect will be saved. The revealed will commands the general, outward call to be proclaimed, but the secret will knows that only a few will receive the effectual, serious calling from the Holy Spirit. The God of hard Calvinism is either disingenuous, cynically making a pseudo-offer of salvation to persons whom He has not given the means to accept, or there is a deep inner conflict within the will of God. If He has extended a general call to all persons to be saved, but has given the effectual call irresistibly to just a few, the general call seems rather misleading. This conflict between the wills of God portrays Him as having a divided mind. In response to this challenge, Calvinists appeal to mystery. Is that a successful move?

The Remonstrants, against whom the Synod of Dort was directed, raised the concern that the hard Calvinist perspective advocated by the Synod of Dort portrayed God as riddled by inner conflict. The Remonstrants later affirmed in a response written after the Synod of Dort:

8. Whomsoever God calls, he calls them seriously, that is, with a sincere and not with a dissembled intention and will of saving them. Neither do we subscribe to the opinion of those persons who assert that God outwardly calls certain men whom he does not will to call inwardly, that is, whom he is unwilling to be truly converted, even prior to their rejection of the grace of calling.

9. There is not in God a secret will of that kind which is so opposed to his will revealed in his word, that according to this same secret will he does not will the conversion and salvation of the greatest part of those whom, by the word of his Gospel, and by his revealed will, he seriously calls and invites to faith and salvation.

10. Neither on this point do we admit of a holy dissimulation, as it is the manner of some men to speak, or of a twofold person in the Deity.⁷⁰

Some Calvinists attempt to downplay this criticism by advocating the “well-meant offer” or “free offer” of the gospel to the lost. As the Synod of Dort affirms in doctrine 2, article 5:

Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel. However, not only do Arminians find this contradictory—so do strong Calvinists! David Engelsma finds little to differentiate the “free offer” Calvinists from Arminians. Engelsma will not permit the appeal by those advocating the promiscuous offer of the gospel to retreat to mystery as an explanation for the apparent conflict within God’s will:

Indeed, we ask the defender of the offer, “On this view why are some saved by the gospel, and others not?” The answer cannot be God’s grace and God’s will, for His grace and His will to save are the same both to those who are saved and to those who perish. The answer must be the will of the sinner— free will. . . .

A customary response by Reformed defenders of the offer to this attack on the offer has been the appeal to “mystery” and “paradox.” How the offer harmonizes with predestination is a “sacred mystery,” unknown and unknowable. . . . Presbyterian and Reformed churches that defend the offer necessarily hold that God is, at one and the same time, gracious to all men and gracious only to some men; and that God, at one and the same time, wills that a certain man be saved and wills that that man be damned. Predestination has them teaching the one thing; and the offer has them teaching the other thing. This, they admit, is seeming contradiction—a “paradox.” This does not embarrass them, for Reformed, biblical truth (so they argue) is paradoxical, illogical, and “mysterious.”

The contention of those who deny the offer is that the God of the Reformed doctrine of predestination cannot be gracious in the gospel to all, and that the God Who has willed the salvation of some and the damnation of others cannot will to save all by the gospel. Particular grace in the gospel is in accord with the particular grace of predestination. The definite will of God for men’s salvation in the gospel is in accord with His definite will in predestination (and, for that matter, with His definite will in the limited atonement of our

Savior). The truth of the Reformed faith is consistent, harmonious, and logical. . . . We charge that the offer involves a Calvinist in sheer contradiction. That God is gracious only to some in predestination, but gracious to all in the gospel, and that God wills only some to be saved in predestination but wills all to be saved by the gospel, is flat, irreconcilable contradiction. It is not paradox, but contradiction. I speak reverently: God Himself cannot reconcile these teachings. . . .

There is no relief for the sheer contradiction in which the offer involves a Calvinist in the doctrine of “common grace,” as though the grace of predestination were a different kind of grace from that revealed in the gospel. For the offer exactly teaches that the grace of God for all is *grace shown in the preaching of the gospel*. This grace is not some non-saving favor directed towards a prosperous earthly life, but saving grace, the grace of God in His dear Son, a grace that desires eternal salvation for all who hear the gospel. The offer proposes universal saving grace—precisely that which is denied by predestination.

Nor is there any relief from this absolute, intolerable contradiction in a distinction between God’s hidden will and God’s revealed will. This is attempted as some kind of explanation and mitigation of the contradiction: The desire to save all (of the offer) is God’s revealed will; the will to save only some (of predestination) is His hidden will. But this effort to relieve the tension of the contradiction in which the offer involves Calvinists gets us nowhere. . . . The distinction leaves us right where we were before the distinction was invented: God has two, diametrically opposite, conflicting wills.⁷¹

Obviously, portraying God as having a divided mind and will is not the way we want to go. It seems disingenuous for God to offer a definitive, serious calling to some but not at all offer a serious calling to others.

The second concern deals with the problem of evil. If God is in total control of everything that happens, and He is the only one who can monergistically regenerate humans, then God has much to answer for in the problem of evil. This concern is heightened by high Calvinist views on divine sovereignty. John Calvin taught that “not one drop of rain falls without God’s sure command,”⁷² and that “God by His secret bridle so holds and governs (persons) that they cannot move even one of their fingers without accomplishing the work of God much more than their own.”⁷³ Wayne Grudem claims that God “exercises an extensive, ongoing, sovereign control over all aspects of His creation.”⁷⁴ If God then is responsible for everything that happens, then He is responsible for evil. Most Calvinists reject this notion, but you cannot have absolute sovereignty without paying the price of God being the creator of evil things.

Some Calvinists, however, in the name of exalting God’s sovereignty, accuse God of causing all things, including sin. R. C. Sproul Jr., for example, says, “Every Bible-believing Christian

must conclude at least that God in some sense desired that man would fall into sin. . . . I am not accusing God of sinning; I am suggesting that he created sin.”⁷⁵ Sproul Jr. describes God as “the Culprit” that caused Eve to sin in the garden.⁷⁶ Sproul Jr.’s argument is that God changed Eve’s inclination to cause her to sin and thus created sin so that His mercy and wrath may be gloriously displayed. His views appear to be at variance with the Westminster Confession, which affirmed that God is not “the author of sin.”⁷⁷ Scripture also denies that God is the author of evil:

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. . . . Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow (Jas 1:13, 16–17 NASB).

The biblical image of God is based on God as love (1 John 4:7–8) and God as holy (1 Pet 1:16). A God who says He loves all people and desires to save all people but intentionally saves just a few is not the God of the New Testament. Imagine a fireman who goes into a burning orphanage to save some young children because they are unable to escape by themselves and can be saved only if he rescues them. Only he can save them because he has an asbestos suit. He comes back in a few minutes bringing out 3 of the 30 children, but rather than going back in to save more children, the fireman goes over to the news media and talks about how praiseworthy he is for saving the three children. Indeed, saving the three children was a good, heroic deed. But the pressing question on everyone’s mind is, What about the other 27 children? Since he has the means to rescue the children and, indeed, is the only one who can save the children since they cannot save themselves, do we view the fireman as morally praiseworthy? I suggest that we would not. In fact, probably he would be charged with depraved indifference. He had the means to help them, but he would not. If we do not find that praiseworthy in a human, why would we find it praiseworthy in God?

In the final analysis two possible answers explain why there is so much evil in the world and why so many people do not become Christians and will receive eternal torment in hell. The Calvinist answer is that God willed it to be that way. Since God ordains and causes all things, He is responsible for all the suffering and pain in our world. Since God is the only One who can save and because He is all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing, He could save everybody. But He does not even save the majority of people. Most people go to hell for all eternity. Why? Some deep mysterious secret will in the character of God is the reason given. That approach, I believe, is not the most honoring approach to God.

But what if we take human responsibility more seriously? Then most of the suffering in the world is our own doing. Those who reject Christ are only getting the just deserts of their own

choices. God’s honor is vindicated. He is holy, loving, and righteous. He does love all people and desires the salvation of all people. He does save all those who come to faith through grace unto salvation. This approach gives God the greatest glory and honor—the approach that the Bible teaches.⁷⁸

5. Irresistible Grace Does Not Have an Adequate Account of Human Freedom

The Calvinist account of willing, developed largely by Jonathan Edwards,⁷⁹ often goes by the name of compatibilism, which assumes that we always act according to our greatest desire. When God changes our wills through irresistible grace, with the Holy Spirit regenerating our spiritual life, then we genuinely desire to trust Christ. We did not have the ability to choose or do anything else. Compatibilism, in any standard definition, affirms the compatibility of freewill and determinism.⁸⁰ The discussion about compatibilism has been muddled sometimes when some theologians define compatibilism as something that it is not—that is, the compatibility of human freewill with divine sovereignty or God’s will.⁸¹ Compatibilism is not the compatibility of human freewill and the sovereignty of God. An open theist, an Arminian, and even a Pelagian would affirm the compatibility of human freedom and God’s sovereignty. Nor is compatibilism the compatibility of human freedom with God’s will. Again, an open theist, an Arminian, and even a Pelagian would affirm the compatibility of human freedom and some sense of God’s will. The compatibility of God’s sovereignty and/or God’s will with human freedom is noncontroversial. The issue is whether or not Christianity is compatible with hard determinism, or whether God exercises His sovereignty in a way that allows for meaningful human freedom.

Strictly speaking, compatibilist “freedom” is really not freedom at all; it is voluntary but not free—that is, just being willing to do something does not mean that a person is free. If someone is pointing a gun at you, you might be willing to hand over your wallet to him, but that does not mean that you do so freely. You give him the wallet because you are under compulsion and have no real choice. To truly be free, there must be a choice between at least two alternatives (even if the only alternatives are “yes” or “no”).

Instead of compatibilist willing, I advocate soft libertarian freedom.⁸² In soft libertarianism, limited choices are available in almost every aspect of life. Absolute freedom, of course, is just a myth. Time does not permit a more thorough discussion of this issue, but soft libertarian freedom has at least the following advantages over compatibilist willing:⁸³

- (a) Soft libertarianism squares with our experience of decision making in real life. Almost universally, we think that when we make decisions, we are genuinely deciding something between real alternatives, not just doing what we most desire all the time.
- (b) We do not always do what we desire the most, as compatibilism claims. We often do what we do not want to do, as Paul expresses in Rom 7:15–16.

(c) Compatibilist willing is not really freedom. You have to have a choice to have freedom. Acts under compulsion are not really free. The human analogies that come to mind about God changing our will in irresistible grace, whereby others change our minds irresistibly and invincibly, are unpleasant phenomena such as hypnotism or brainwashing. Obviously, these are not pleasant phenomena, and are not appropriate when applied to God.

(d) In libertarian freedom, we are morally accountable for our choices. In compatibilism, it is difficult to hold us morally accountable because we really had no choice.

(e) Only libertarian freedom offers the real choice required to accept, receive, or respond actively to the gracious offer of God through the Holy Spirit.

6. Irresistible Grace Has an Inadequate View of Time and Eternity

The entire superstructure of Calvinism is built upon the *ordo salutis*, the order of salvation, which begins with God’s decrees. God predestines those whom He has chosen and then effectually calls them when their time on earth comes along. The others receive the general call but not sufficient grace to be saved.

Romans 8:29–30 provides the pattern for the order of salvation:

For those He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brothers. And those He predestined, He also called; and those He called, He also justified; and those He justified, He also glorified (Rom 8:29–30 HCSB).

Note that the pattern begins with God’s exhaustive foreknowledge of all things, including who is going to respond to His gracious initiative in faith. My position follows the order of Rom 8:28–30—God foreknows those who will respond in faith, and on the basis of that foreknowledge He predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies them. However, some say that basing election on comprehensive divine foreknowledge (including foreseen faith responses of individuals) does not make sense. They point out that it does not fit neatly into the categories of human logic. How could God foreknow all things before the foundation of the world and yet allow us genuine libertarian free will? How could God be sure of something before we do it? If He knows for sure what we are going to do and choose before we do it, do we really have a choice? How could God foreknow that we are going to change our minds? Once God knows what we are going to do, does it not become fixed and determined so that we have no real free choice—we can choose nothing else? How do we respond to these concerns? The fundamental problem is that these objections apply limitations to God’s omniscience and foreknowledge. God is by definition outside of time and space, and so

these things are like child’s play to Him. Perhaps the critics are right—it really is impossible from a human perspective. Who could traverse outside of time? Who could do what seems so impossible to human logic?

Who could do such a thing? It would have to be Someone whose ways and thoughts are above human ways and thoughts as the heaven is above the earth, Someone who is eternal and transcends time, the great I AM who is from everlasting to everlasting, Someone who was, is, and is to come, and Someone who is Creator of the heavens and the earth, who set the foundations of the universe in place and established the laws of nature. It would have to be Someone who created all the laws of logic and is Himself Truth, and Someone who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. It would have to be Someone who could become incarnate among us and live as fully God yet fully man, Someone who could turn water into wine, heal lepers, make the lame to walk, make the blind to see, and make the dead to live, Someone who could win the victory over death and the grave by being resurrected to life, and Someone who is going to come again for us and lead us into eternity. Is anything too hard for God (Jer 32:27; Matt 19:26; Luke 1:37)?

From a human perspective for God to foreknow our responses before we make them is impossible. But what is impossible for man is possible with God, who transcends space and time.

7. Irresistible Grace Does Not Maximize God’s Sovereignty and Glory

Clearly, Calvinism is associated with a high view of the sovereignty of God. This reputation is well deserved. In particular, Calvinists were among those who pointed out the errors of the low-sovereignty approach of the openness of God. We join Calvinists such as Bruce Ware in opposing the diminished sovereignty view of Open Theism, especially because of its denial of exhaustive divine sovereignty.⁸⁴ Several excellently written books affirming a high view of divine sovereignty have been published recently by Calvinist scholars.⁸⁵ Likewise, we affirm the strong emphasis on glorifying God that John Piper has articulated so well, that glorifying God should be our primary vocation.⁸⁶ These are hardly doctrines that are unique to Calvinism. Acknowledging the sovereignty of God and praising the glory of God are simply basic Christian beliefs, sort of like being for mom and apple pie. Not much controversy there. So we are glad to share these affirmations with Calvinists.

Since we all agree that God is sovereign and worthy of glory, two related questions arise: How does God express His sovereignty, and what gives God maximal glory? The contention here is that, contra Calvinists, irresistible grace does not accord God maximal sovereignty and glory, while resistible grace does.

First, how is God’s sovereignty exhibited? Calvinists understand that God exhibits His sovereignty by essentially micromanaging creation through meticulous providence—that is, He rules in such a way that nothing happens without His control and specific direction. God made decrees before the foundation of the world, which scripted everything that is going to happen, so that now we are just playing out the puppet show that God has decreed. John Frame defines “God’s decretive will” as His “highly mysterious” purpose that “governs whatever comes to pass.”⁸⁷ Therefore, Calvinists such as John Feinberg defend the deterministic dictum that “God ordains all things.”⁸⁸ Feinberg follows Richard Taylor’s definition of determinism “that for everything that happens there are conditions such that, given them, nothing else could happen,” and thus “for every decision a person makes, there are causal conditions playing upon his or her will so as to decline it decisively or sufficiently in one direction or the other. Consequently, the agent could not have done otherwise, given the prevailing causal influences.”⁸⁹ Paul Helm explains that “God controls all persons and events equally” because “God could hardly exercise care over them without having control over it.”⁹⁰ However, although persons do not have the ability to choose from among various alternatives, we are willing to do what is done: “He [God] exercises his control, as far as men and women are concerned, not apart from what they want to do, or (generally speaking) by compelling them to do what they do not want to do, but through their wills.”⁹¹

Doing what humans will or desire, as opposed to what they choose, is what Calvinists call compatibilist freedom. In the compatibilist approach, humans always do what they desire the greatest. So in regard to salvation, when God changes humans’ wills through the effectual calling and regeneration, they voluntarily choose to follow Christ. But they do this only after God has irresistibly and invincibly changed their wills. Apart from this total control, Calvinists argue, God would not be sovereign. Calvinists often invoke mocking and scornful language to characterize the belief that salvation is synergistic, depending to some extent on human response. They see the genuine free choice of humans as an insult to God’s sovereignty, making God a lesser God who does not ordain or decree everything that happens. In particular, like most evangelicals, they have opposed the view of open theism that God cannot foreknow the future with 100 percent accuracy, especially the free choices of human beings.

Again, Baptists reject the lesser God of open theism. In the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, the following statement was added in article II to deny expressly the belief of open theism that God does not have exhaustive foreknowledge: “God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures.”⁹² We are all in agreement that human choices are never outside of God’s knowledge, and nothing is ever beyond God’s ability to control.

On the face of it, the Calvinist argument seems to make sense from a human perspective. God is God and He can do anything He wants. Of course, He can! Nothing can limit God. God’s kingdom is going to come, and His will is going to be done, whether anybody on earth likes it or not. So there is no question that God has the *right* to reign in this way, and the *ability* to reign in this way. From a human perspective, we tend to equate sovereignty with power and control. If, for example, you were a tyrannical despot in a late medieval European city, you might well think that being sovereign means to have total control, to banish, exile, torture, and kill those who disagree with you. But is this the way of Christ?

Does this notion of sovereignty as total control bring glory to God? No. Suppose a couple desires to have a baby. They have at least two options. Option one is that they can go down to Wal-Mart and purchase a doll. That plastic doll, for every time they pull its string, will say, “Daddy, I love you!” Now that is total control. They can have that doll say, “I love you” anytime they want. They just pull its string; the doll has no decision but to react the way it has been programmed to react. Option two, however, is to have a real baby. Now, they know from the beginning that the baby is going to be more trouble. Babies do not come home from the hospital housebroken. They cry all night. They break their toes, and they break your hearts. But when that child of his or her own volition says, “Daddy, I love you,” it really means something. The parents are more glorified with a real child than with a doll that could not have praised them had they not pulled its string. So, then, which gives God the greater glory—a view that the only persons who can praise God are those whose wills He changes without their permission, or the view that persons respond to the gracious invitation of God and the conviction of the Holy Spirit to praise God truly of their own volition?

So the question is not, Is God powerful enough to reign in any way He wants? Of course, He is. God is omnipotent and can do anything He wants. As the Scripture says, “For who can resist His will?” (Rom 9:19 HCSB). But the question is, What is God’s will? How has God chosen to reign in the hearts of persons? If God is truly sovereign, He is free to choose what He sovereignly chooses. So how has He chosen to reign?

We know that natural, sinful humanity does not seek God (Rom 3:11). However, God has sovereignly chosen to allow human choices to have eternal significance, to receive, to assent, or to respond to His gracious initiatives. Nothing could possibly force God to do that. It is His own sovereign choice. He obviously could force irresistible grace on us, but He does not. That is not the way He tends to work. He could have written all of Scripture with His own fingers, as He did with the Ten Commandments, but He did not. He worked through human authors to write down His inerrant Word. He could have sent angels as His messengers so that the message was accurate. But He chose to work through prophets and preachers, through the “foolishness of preaching,” as earthen vessels communicate an infinitely

valuable message. He could have saved us by irresistible grace, but I do not believe that He does. He requires us to respond.

The three parables in Luke 15 are instructive about human response. The lost sheep and the lost coin must be sought out and rescued by the owner. But in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the one parable dealing with a human being who is lost, the account differs. The prodigal son wanders into the far country out of his own lust and arrogance. Not until he has “wasted his substance with riotous living” and is “in want” does he come “to himself” (Luke 15:13–14, 17 KJV). The waiting father eagerly hopes for the son’s return but does not go and find him and compel him to come home.

Jesus talked about receiving the grace of God. In Mark 10:15 (see Luke 9:48; 18:17), He said that unless you receive the kingdom of God like a little child, you will never enter it. The Greek word is *dechomai*, which means “to receive,” “to take up,” “to take by the hand.”⁹³ Likewise, in John 1:12, “As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (KJV). Here the Greek word is *paralambano*, meaning “to take to oneself,” “to join an associate to oneself,” “to accept or acknowledge one to be such as he professes to be,” “not to reject,” or “to receive something transmitted.”⁹⁴ In John 3:11 we see the negative, “You do not accept Our testimony” (John 3:11 HCSB), again using *lambano*, “to receive.”⁹⁵

Throughout Scripture we have one imperative command after another— hundreds of imperatives. Each of these imperatives calls upon us to respond. Why do you think God put so many imperatives in His Word if He did not require a response from us?

“Choose you this day whom ye will serve” (Josh 24:15 KJV).

“Seek the LORD and His strength; seek His face continually” (1 Chron 16:11 NASB).

“Seek the LORD” (Zeph 2:3 HCSB).

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28 NASB; c.f. Luke 7:37).

“Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38 NASB).

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31 NASB).

Why does God offer so many conditional promises if He does not intend to receive them?

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chron 7:14 NIV).

“If you seek Him, He will be found of you” (2 Chron 15:2 HCSB).

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt 16:24–25 KJV; c.f. Mark 8:34–35; Luke 9:23–24).

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. With the heart one believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses, resulting in salvation” (Rom 10:9–10 HCSB).

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev 3:20 NASB).

“And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let him that heareth say, ‘Come.’ And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev 22:17 KJV).

Why does God give us promises if they are not meant for us to claim? You, LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You (Ps 9:10 NKJV).

They who seek the LORD shall not be in want of any good thing (Ps 34:10 NASB).

“Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God, to you is the word of this salvation sent” (Acts 13:26 KJV).

Granted, in and of themselves, people’s choices accomplish nothing. Perhaps the best model is the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. Naaman, the commander of the Aramite army, had leprosy. He asked for help. The prophet Elisha told him to go wash in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman initially rejected that notion, complaining about having to bathe in the dirty Jordan River. Finally, after his servants prevailed upon him, he did it, and his leprosy was cleansed. What was it that cleansed Naaman’s leprosy? Was it his dunking himself in the Jordan River seven times? Of course not! He could have dunked himself in the river a thousand times and nothing would have happened. On the other hand, what happened when he did not go bathe? Nothing! God allowed him to suffer the results of his own rebellion. But when Naaman responded obediently to God’s direction through the prophet, Naaman was healed.

So it is with our salvation. Humans do not do anything to earn or deserve salvation. Humans are too sinful in nature to seek God independently or take the initiative in their own salvation. Humans can come to salvation only as they are urged to by the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and they are drawn to Christ as He is lifted up in proclamation. Cooperation contributes absolutely nothing to human salvation. God’s grace provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for salvation. However, God in His freedom has sovereignly decided that He will give the gift of salvation to those who believe, who trust Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. So salvation truly is monergistic—only God provides for human salvation, and He alone. Before He does so, He requires humans to respond. If humans do not respond, then He does not save. If humans do respond, He surrounds them with overpowering grace impelling them forward until they come to the point of repentance and faith.

Almost everyone in the evangelical tradition, including Baptists, affirms that salvation is not by works. Everyone affirms Eph 2:8–9 (NKJV): “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” If salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, what alternatives are there to affirming irresistible grace? The most common alternative to irresistible grace is usually called *prevenient* or *assisting* grace. In *assisting grace*, God through the Holy Spirit convicts, convinces, and impels the unsaved toward repentance and faith. God can exert powerful influences through the Holy Spirit to incline unbelievers toward faith and obedience without literally forcing them to do so or changing their wills. Humans cannot save themselves. They are like drowning men in the middle of a vast ocean. There is no way they could even approach swimming to shore. “Salvation” must come from without, from beyond themselves. Perhaps a rescue ship might come alongside and throw life buoys out to us, and the rescuers yell for us to grab the life buoy so they could pull us out of the water. Perhaps we would be so weakened that we could not even do that, and a rescue helicopter would have to lower a line with a rescuer to pick us up out of the water. In these situations we do not and cannot save ourselves. We can do no “good works.” The only thing humans would have to do is assent to be rescued, or at least not resist being rescued. Giving one’s assent to be saved is not “good work.” Unfortunately, in the world of salvation, all too many refuse to accept Jesus’ gracious offer of salvation. Most do not even recognize that they are drowning and rejecting all efforts to warn them. Some foolishly think they can save themselves, but they cannot. In the end, because of their rejection of the persistent witness of the Holy Spirit and the salvation proffered through Christ, God reluctantly allows them to drown eternally in their own sins (Matt 12:32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10; Rom 1:21–32, 5:6–21).

Billy Graham puts it so well:

There is also volitional resolution. The will is necessarily involved in conversion. People can pass through mental conflicts and emotional crises without being

converted. Not until they exercise the prerogative of a free moral agent and will to be converted are they actually converted. This act of will is an act of acceptance and commitment. They willingly accept God’s mercy and receive God’s Son and then commit themselves to do God’s will. In every true conversion the will of man comes into line with the will of God. Almost the last word of the Bible is this invitation: “And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely” (Rev 22:17). It is up to you. You must will to be saved. It is God’s will, but it must become your will, too.⁹⁶

Not surprisingly, God does not think the way we do. As God says in His Word, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:9 KJV). Hear again God’s statement in Hosea 11:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man, the Holy One in your midst; and I will not come with terror (Hos 11:8–9 NKJV).

If you or I had omnipotent power and were faced with a stubborn and rebellious people, perhaps we would just torch them in our anger. We might feel not only that we were exercising greater sovereignty and authority, but in so doing we might deem ourselves more glorious. But God said, “I am God, and not man, the Holy One in your midst.” Evidently, God’s ways are truly not like our ways. Jesus taught us that God sees greatness in a different light—doing things God’s way involves not total control or the arbitrary use of power, but a servant spirit:

But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25–28 NKJV; c.f. Mark 10:42–45; Luke 22:25–28).

In Luke’s account Jesus mentions that these Gentile authorities were called “benefactors” (Luke 22:25), persons who dispensed gracious acts on which subjects they chose. But Jesus said it should not be so for God’s people, and He grounded that on nothing other than Himself—“just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”

Although God truly has the right and ability to do whatever He wants whenever He wants, God does not normally choose to express His sovereignty in that way. God evidently sees servanthood and allowing the free choices of His creatures as more glorious than the arbitrary exertion of power and authority. The plan that some of Jesus’ disciples had to glorify

Christ was for Him to overthrow the Romans, seize the throne of Israel, and exercise control as king, but God had a better plan. He sent Jesus to the shameful cross. It is hard for humans to understand sovereignty and glory in this way, but we are truly to have the mind of Christ Jesus,

who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:6–11 NKJV).

We have it from God’s own Word—that is the way He wants to exercise sovereignty, and that is what He finds to be glorious. We should understand sovereignty and glory from God’s perspective, not from a human perspective. We believe God deserves more than the lesser glory and sovereignty of open theism and even more than the greater glory and sovereignty offered by Calvinism. Let us recognize God’s maximal sovereignty and give Him the maximal glory that He deserves!

Conclusion

This essay has raised significant biblical and theological issues that challenge the viability of the doctrine of irresistible grace. I believe that the cumulative case that has been raised against irresistible grace is compelling. Certainly, high-Calvinists have their own explanations for some of these concerns. I encourage each believer, like the Bereans encountered by Paul (Acts 17:10–11), to search what the Scriptures say concerning these issues, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who leads us into all truth (John 16:13).

NOTES

1. “The Five Arminian Articles,” Articles III and IV, in *The Creeds of Christendom* (ed. P. Schaff; 6th ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:547, available online at ([Puritan Mind Arminian Articles](#) accessed November 1, 2008).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. “The Canons of the Synod of Dort,” Heads III and IV, Rejection of Errors, Articles VII and VIII, in Schaff, 3:570 (in Latin). For an English translation, see L. M. Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism* (rev. ed.; Pensacola: Vance, 1999), Appendix 4, 621–22, which

is also available online at [RELIGIO-POLITICAL TALK](#); added and accessed October 3, 2025.

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. D. N. Steele, C. C. Thomas, and S. L. Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (expanded ed.; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), 52–54.
8. J. Piper and the Bethlehem Baptist Church staff, “[What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism](#),” p. 10, or at [[LINK DEAD](#) accessed November 1, 2008.]
9. Piper and the Bethlehem Baptist Church staff, “[What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism](#),” 12.
10. R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1994), 69–70.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 122.
15. Ibid.
16. “The Canons of the Synod of Dort,” Heads III and IV, Rejection of Errors, Articles VII and VIII, in Schaff, 3:570 (in Latin). For an English translation, see L. M. Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, [Appendix 4](#), 621–22, which is also available online at [Historic Faith](#) accessed November 1, 2008.
17. Nathan Finn, “Southern Baptist Calvinism: Setting the Record Straight,” in *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue* (ed. E. R. Clendenen and B. J. Waggoner; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 171–92, esp. 184; citing “The C-Word,” a sermon preached at Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, AL, on August 11, 1997, posted online at (reproduced at Religio-Political Talk, download the [PDF here](#))
18. “The Canons of the Synod of Dort,” Heads III and IV, Articles 10 and 12, in Schaff, 3:589–90.
19. J. White, “Irresistible Grace: God Saves Without Fail,” in *Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views*, by Dave Hunt and James White (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 197 (italics mine).

20. Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, *Five Points of Calvinism*, 7 (italics mine).
21. “The Canons of the Synod of Dort,” Heads III and IV, Rejection of Errors, Articles VII and VIII, in Schaff, 3:570 (in Latin); for an English translation, see Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, Appendix 4, 621–22 (italics mine).
22. Piper and the Bethlehem Baptist Church staff, “What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism,” 10, 12 (italics mine).
23. W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1966), 286; J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1977), 51; F. W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 90.
24. J. Piper and the Bethlehem Baptist Church staff, “What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism.”
25. Israel’s election to service as a chosen people and individual election to salvation for Christians is interwoven in Romans 9–11. Calvinists often do not give adequate attention to the former.
26. G. Schrenk, s.v. “*thelo, thelema, thelesis*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:48–49.
27. Ibid.
28. B. Reicke, s.v. “*pas*” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; trans. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 5:886–96; Thayer, “*pas*,” *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 491–93; Danker, “*pas*,” *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 782–84. Danker notes that *pas* pertains “to totality” with a “focus on its individual components” (p. 782).
29. Thayer, “*hostis*,” *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 33–34, 454–57; Danker, “*hostis*,” *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 56–57, 725–27, 729–30. Danker notes that *hostis* means “whoever, everyone, who, in a generalizing sense,” and when combined with *an* “the indefiniteness of the expression is heightened” (p. 729).
30. See also Mark 8:38/Luke 9:26; Mark 9:37/Luke 9:48; Mark 10:15; and Luke 14:27.
31. In this section I write with reference to The Baptist Faith and Message 2000, available online at the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry at <http://baptistcenter.com/bfm2000.html> (AT SBC.NET) Commentary on the confession can be found in C. S. Kelley Jr., R. Land, and R. A. Mohler Jr., *The Baptist*

Faith and Message 2000 (Nashville: Lifeway, 2007); and D. Blount and J. Wooddell, *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America’s Largest Protestant Denomination* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

32. Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article III, “Man.”
33. *Ibid.*, Article III, “Man.”
34. *Ibid.*, Article IV, “Salvation.”
35. *Ibid.*, Article V, “God’s Purpose of Grace.”
36. *Ibid.*, Article I c, “God the Holy Spirit.”
37. D. J. Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), 13–16.
38. *Ibid.*, 82.
39. *Ibid.*, 70–78.
40. “The Canons of the Synod of Dort,” Head I, Article 17, in Schaff, 3:585.
41. “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” chapter X, Article III, in Schaff, 3:625.
42. R. C. Sproul Jr., “Comfort Ye My People—Justification by Youth Alone: When Does Comfort Become Confusion?” *World* 10, no. 7 (May 6, 1995): 26.
43. *Ibid.*
44. For example, John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis (a Baptist General Conference church), presented the church’s elders a paper called “Twelve Theses on Baptism and Its Relationship to Church Membership, Church Leadership, and Wider Affiliations and Partnerships of Bethlehem Baptist Church” in January 2002. In this paper Piper proposed the following amendment concerning the requirement for baptism for membership in the church: “Therefore, where the belief in the Biblical validity of infant baptism does not involve baptismal regeneration or the guarantee of saving grace, this belief is not viewed by the elders of Bethlehem Baptist Church as a weighty or central enough departure from Biblical teaching to exclude a person from membership, if he meets all other relevant qualifications and is persuaded from Bible study and a clear conscience that his baptism is valid. In such a case we would not require baptism by immersion as a believer for membership but would teach and pray toward a change of mind that would lead such members eventually to such a baptism” (John Piper, “Twelve Theses on Baptism and Its Relationship to Church Membership, Church Leadership, and Wider Affiliations and

Partnerships of Bethlehem Baptist Church,” in [Baptism and Church Membership at Bethlehem Baptist Church: Eight Recommendations for Constitutional Revision](#) [by J. Piper, A. Chediak, and T. Steller, 14]. The doctrinal confession of the Baptist General Conference of which Bethlehem Baptist Church is a part affirms: “We believe that Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water into the name of the triune God.” (See “The Ordinances,” art. 9 of *An Affirmation of Our Faith*, available [added 10/3/2025 - [at Becker Baptist Church](#)]. Piper’s proposed statement did not find general agreement among the church’s elders. After the issue was discussed for several years, an amended policy was approved eventually by the elders in August 2005 but later was withdrawn in the face of public outcry.

45. White, *Debating Calvinism*, 197–98.
46. J. MacArthur, “Coming Alive in Christ,” a sermon available online at [YOUTUBE](#) and at [GRACE TO YOU](#), accessed October 3, 2025.
47. J. Piper and the Bethlehem Baptist Church staff, “What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism,” available at [DESIRING GOD](#).
48. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, 72–73.
49. I am using the term *enabling grace* to be synonymous with prevenient grace. The issue is *not* whether unaided humans would naturally seek God without His grace. The issue is whether the Holy Spirit regenerates persons before they respond in faith to God. In both approaches, it is the Holy Spirit who, through gospel preaching and other means, convicts and convinces sinners to repent of their sins and to trust Christ.
50. Charles Spurgeon, “Mssrs. Moody and Sankey Defended; or, A Vindication of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith,” *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 21 (1875): 337.
51. Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991), 101.
52. Piper and the Bethlehem Baptist Church staff, “What We Believe About the Five Points of Calvinism,” 14.
53. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1955), 28–29, 229.
54. “The Westminster Confession of Faith,” chapter X, Article III, in Schaff, 3:625.
55. For interesting statistical data, see Steve Lemke, “The Future of the Southern Baptist Convention as Evangelicals,” a paper presented at the Maintaining Baptist

Distinctives Conference at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in April 2005, available online at [RELIGIO-POLITICAL TALK](#).

56. Boettner, 101.

57. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1980), 2:622.

58. John Frame, interview by Marco Gonzalez, posted December 2, 2005 available online at [FRAME-POYTHRESS.ORG](#), accessed October 3, 2025.

59. T. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and in World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004). For a critique of this book, see S. Lemke, “Teaching Them to Observe the Doctrine of Salvation: Tiessen’s Accessibilism vs. Jesus’ Exclusivism” (paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, in San Diego, CA, on November 14, 2007 available online at [New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary](#)).

60. “The Canons of the Synod of Dort,” head II, article V, in Schaff, 3:586.

61. D. Engelsma, “Is Denial of the ‘Well-Meant Offer’ Hyper-Calvinism?,” available online at [Protestant Reformed Churches of America](#), accessed October 23, 2008.

62. Although the Protestant Reformed Churches are often labeled as hyper-Calvinists, Engelsma strenuously objects to that caricature and rejects that description because the PRC still advocates preaching the gospel to all persons, not just the elect. He describes hyper-Calvinists as “an aberration, if not a heresy” for refusing to preach to anyone but the elect (Engelsma, “Is Denial of the ‘Well-Meant Offer’ Hyper-Calvinism?,” *op. cit.*). From my experience, no one wants to be labeled a hyper-Calvinist since the term lacks consistent definition and thus is not a useful term.

63. Engelsma, “[Is Denial of the ‘Well-Meant Offer’ Hyper-Calvinism?](#),” *op.cit.*

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. For a discussion on this issue, see J. Elliff, K. Keathley, and M. Coppenger, “Walking the Aisle,” in *Heartland* (Summer 1999): 1, 4–9. Three articles in this issue discuss the public invitation: J. Elliff, “Closing with Christ,” 1, 6–7; K. Keathley, “Rescuing the

- Perishing,” 1, 4–6; and M. Coppenger, “Kairos and the Altar Call,” 8–9. Elliff argues that altar calls are unbiblical, Keathley argues that invitations are biblical and appropriate, and Coppenger allows for some limited use of altar calls. See also K. Keathley, “Rescue the Perishing: A Defense of Giving Invitations,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 4–16, available online from the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry of [New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary](#).
70. “The Opinions of the Remonstrants,” Responses to article III of the Synod of Dort, comments 8–10, in Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, appendix 3, 604; or available online at [RELIGIO-POLITICAL TALK](#).
71. Engelsma, “[Is Denial of the ‘Well-Meant Offer’ Hyper-Calvinism?](#)”, *op.cit.*
72. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (LCC 20, 21; London: SCM Press, 1960), I.16.4–5. Calvin also asserts God’s meticulous providence in matters such as which mothers have milk and others do not (*Institutes*, I.16.3).
73. J. Calvin, *A Defence of the Secret Providence of God, by Which He Executes His Eternal Decrees* (trans. Henry Cole; London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1927), 238.
74. W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 355. For example, John Piper has unambiguously attributed causal origin of disasters such as aircraft crashes to God alone. For example, regarding a well-publicized airline crash, Piper states that “the crash of flight 1549 was designed by God.” According to Piper, God precisely guided the geese into both engines of the plane, but also assisted the captain’s hands in the amazing landing of the flight in the Hudson River. Piper opines that the reason God did this was to provide a parable for the upcoming inauguration of President Obama. See John Piper, “[The President, the Passengers, and the Patience of God](#),” January 21, 2009, accessed 12/31/09. Piper apparently did not provide an explanation of God’s purpose (nor does any sensible explanation come to mind) for crashing a Continental Airlines flight into a house in Clarence Center (near Buffalo), New York, the next month (2/13/09), killing all 49 persons on board and one in the house that was hit. For details, see [NEW YORK TIMES](#) via [ARCHIVE](#) [accessed and added 10/3/2025].
75. R. C. Sproul Jr., *Almighty in Authority: Understanding the Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 53–54.
76. *Ibid.*, 51.
77. Westminster Confession, Art. 3, par 1.

78. For more on this concern about Calvinism and the problem of evil, see “Evil and God’s Sovereignty,” by Bruce A. Little, in chapter 11 of this book.
79. Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (New York: Cosimo, 2007). For more contemporary advocates of compatibilism, see P. Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994); P. Helm, “Classical Calvinist Doctrine of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views* (ed. B. Ware; Nashville: Broadman and Holman), 5–75; J. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), chap. 14, 677–776; and “God Ordains All Things,” in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty*, ed. D. and R. Basinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 17–60.
80. E. Craig, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Free Will,” by G. Strawson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 3:743–53; *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Free Will,” by G. Strawson (New York: Routledge, 2000), 293–95; S. Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “Free Will” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 147; R. Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “Free Will,” by T. Kapitan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 326–28; D. Borchart, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Determinism and Freedom,” by T. Honderich, 3:24–29; T. Mautner, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “Compatibilism” (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 76; *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, online at s.v. “[Compatibilism](#),” by M. McKenna, and “[Arguments for Incompatibilism](#),” by K. Vihvlin; accessed 10/27/09.
81. For examples of this confusion, see D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 200–204; B. Ware, *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 73–85, and in “A Modified Calvinist Doctrine of God” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, 98–99. Paul Helm points out Ware’s inconsistent use of these terms in *Perspectives*, 44. An example of a compatibilist who avoids these confusions is John Feinberg in *No One Like Him*, 635–39.
82. For more details, see S. Lemke, “Agent Causation, or How to Be a Soft Libertarian,” available online at S. Lemke, “[Agent Causation and Moral Accountability: A Proposal of the Criteria for Moral Responsibility](#),” available online at cf. A. Mele, “Soft Libertarianism and the Flickers of Freedom,” in *Moral Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities: Essays on the Importance of Alternative Possibilities* (ed. D. Widerker and M. McKenna (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 251–64; and A. Mele, *Free Will and Luck* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

83. For more on this concern, see “Lemke, “[Agent Causation, or How to Be a Soft Libertarian](#)”; Lemke, “[Agent Causation and Moral Accountability](#)”; and “Reflections on Determinism and Human Freedom,” by Jeremy Evans, in chapter 10 of this book.
84. Ware’s devastating critique is in B. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000).
85. See B. Ware, *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith*; and T. Schreiner and B. Ware, eds., *Still Sovereign: Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). The title of the latter book seems a bit misleading in that it suggests multiple perspectives, but, in fact the book is written entirely from a Calvinistic perspective.
86. J. Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998).
87. J. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1994), 175.
88. J. Feinberg, “God Ordains All Things,” in *Predestination and Freewill: Four Views on Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, by J. S. Feinberg, D. Basinger, R. Basinger, and C. Pinnock (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 17–60.
89. *Ibid.*, 21, citing the definition in R. Taylor, “Determinism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. P. Edwards; New York: Macmillan, 1967): 2:359.
90. P. Helm, *The Providence of God* (Contours of Christian Theology series; ed. G. Bray; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 20–21.
91. *Ibid.*, 22.
92. Baptist Faith and Message 2000, Article II, “God.”
93. Thayer, 130, ref. 1209.
94. *Ibid.*, 484, ref. 3880.
95. *Ibid.*, 870–971, ref. 2983.
96. B. Graham, *The World Aflame* (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1967), 134.