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Irresistible Grace

Owen J. Thomas

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In order of consideration, the idea of 'irresistible grace' follows on directly once the doctrine of election is reasonably laid down. If God's people are elected to redemption, the question immediately follows: How do they become partakers of it? Here the frontier between dogmatic and pastoral theology has already been reached, and the problems involved in the answer to this question cannot well be discussed without due regard to their pastoral implications. At the same time the doctrine must not be left to the mercy of purely subjective considerations, nor should philosophical speculations concerning 'foreknowledge' and 'necessity' be allowed to decide the matter. Many theologians, ancient and modern, are quite clearly alarmed by the implications of such a question. Some would protest that it is over-simplified when Calvin affirms: 'The fathers are sometimes too scrupulous on this subject, and afraid of a simple confession of the truth, lest they should afford an occasion to impiety to speak irreverently and reproachfully of the works of God. Though I highly approve this sobriety, yet I think we are in no danger, if we simply maintain what the Scripture delivers.' (*Institutes*, Book II, ch. IV. iii.).

The Shorter Catechism, which has an admittedly pastoral bent, answers the question as follows: 'We are made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ by the effectual application of it to us by His Holy Spirit.' It further explains that the Spirit performs this operation by 'working faith in us, and hereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.' (*Shorter Catechism*, Answer 30.) Then it further enlarges on the nature of 'effectual calling': '(It) is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds to the knowledge of Christ and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel'.

The term 'effectual calling', as described in the *Shorter Catechism*, does not state explicitly the idea of 'irresistible grace'. Yet the larger *Confession of Faith* makes it perfectly clear that this is what the Westminster Divines had in mind by using the term 'effectual calling': '(They are called) out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ, taking away their hearts of stone and renewing their wills; and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ, yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.' Then, as if challenged to be more explicit, the Confession explains: 'This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.' (*Confession of Faith*, ch. 12, sections 1 and 2.)

The purpose of this article is to show that this doctrine may be reasonably

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argued from the conservative evangelical point of view, therefore it will be of first importance to examine 'what the Scripture delivers.'

I. THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

First of all, the witness of the Apostle Paul is that the call of God contains a sufficiency of grace which is designed to be effective in the salvation of the elect. Generally speaking, this is seen in the fact that, although among those who were designated the people of God, or 'Israel', the election of God seems to have been largely frustrated, as, for example, in the days of Ahab, when the majority worshipped Baal, yet in actual fact this was not so, because God had reserved to Himself 'seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal'. Paul here concludes: 'What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it.' (Rom. xi. 7.) An interesting personification which implies that, within the election, God operates the means whereby it becomes effective.

The Apostle elsewhere gives more detail, showing that the election becomes effective 'through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth'. (2 Thess. ii. 13.) The extent to which this divine initiative is needed is measured out in a further striking statement in the Letter to the Ephesians: '...and you did he quicken, when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins.' (Eph. ii. 1). This reinforces an earlier statement in the Letter to the Romans to the effect that divine redemption was accomplished in the face of human impotence '...when we were yet weak, in due season Christ died for the ungodly.' (v. 6).

There are also Old Testament passages cited which seem to indicate that the New Covenant was to be made effective in its beneficiaries by an effectual call. So, for example, Ezekiel describes its application as the giving of a new heart, the putting within of a new spirit. Deuteronomy has already described it as circumcision of the heart. It seems possible also that this is what the Psalmist meant when he said: 'Thy people offer themselves willingly in the day of thy power,' (Psalm cx. 3) the idea being that in the midst of a world at enmity with God, one of the most notable manifestations of His sovereign power would be the willingness of His elect people. There is more than a hint of this also in the great 'Evangelical Prophet'. The word of God will carry with it the means of working effectually in those for whom it is determined. This is compared to natural causes, which have inevitable results: 'As the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, ... so shall my word be that goeth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please.' (Isa. iv. 10, ii). An interesting sidelight on this is the interpretation which E. J. Young suggests for Isaiah liii. 1. He takes the two questions as a synonymous parallelism. This would mean that 'believing the report' would be the result of a divine operation implied in 'the arm of the Lord revealed'. (*Isaiah Fifty-three*, ad. loc.)

Turning again to the New Testament, the *Confession* further instances statements of our Lord Jesus Christ, as recorded by the Evangelists, which seem clearly to lend weight to this view. The elect are given to Him by the Father. Their initial characteristic or distinguishing mark is, that they come to Him

'All that which the Father giveth me shall come unto me.' (John vi. 37.) They make the right choice, which, at the same time, has as its determining antecedent the choice of Christ Himself: 'Ye did not choose me, but I chose you.' (John xv. 16.) They are also aware of Who He is and are able to confess Him 'the Son of God'; which, in turn, is a further manifestation of an effectual call, because this saving knowledge is not so much arrived at as given by God. Such gospel knowledge is not the result of human speculation, however penetrating, but is imparted to and apprehended by those whose minds are invaded by a divine revelation. So to Simon, after his climactic outburst in Caesarea Philippi, the mystic rejoinder comes, 'Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.' (Matt. xvi. 17; cp. also xi. 27). This is strongly borne out by the Johannine record of Christ's intimate prayer to the Father before the final conflict of the Cross. The disciples are referred to as 'the men whom thou gavest me out of the world...', regarding whom, together with all believers in every age, perfect unity of purpose is expressed, as between Father and Son, and in whom this unity of love must be progressively reflected or realized. 'All mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them.... Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; ... that the love wherewith thou lovedst me may be in them, and I in them.' (John xvii. 6-26.) The whole atmosphere and manner of this prayer suggests that it will be unconditionally answered (see verse 2).

Such is the Scripture testimony adduced as to the essence of such a call; but now that which is remarked as to the means whereby it is applied to each believer may be reviewed.

A catena of passages from the Pauline Epistles is brought to bear on this vital aspect of the subject. In 2. Tim. i. 9, the phrase κλήσει ἁγία ('holy calling') is most interesting, being in the instrumental case adverbial to καλέσαντος ('having called'), which in turn is in parallel construction with σώσαντος ἡμῶς ('having saved us'). The conjunction καὶ (and) may here quite reasonably be taken as having exegetical force, so that the second makes a kind of synthetic parallelism, adding to the meaning. This would therefore seem to indicate that those who are saved are enabled to apprehend their salvation, not from their own initiative, but through a grace imparted in the 'holy calling'. The Apostle seems at pains to emphasize this Divine initiative, as he further explains the manner of its operation: 'Who saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his purpose and grace...' (2 Tim. i. 9.) This is matched by another quotation which has become the classic proof text for the doctrine of 'salvation by faith alone'. 'For by grace have ye been saved through faith; ... not of works, that no man should glory.' (Eph. ii. 8.) The most significant part of this verse, however, is the second clause: '...and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God'. Faith to respond is itself part of the operation of the 'grace' of God, and, apparently in the full realization of the significance of these words, Paul continues, 'For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them.' The inner working of this mystery of grace is described in more detail in the letter to Titus: 'according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost' (iii. 5).

The theme of regeneration leads almost automatically to the consideration of another passage, this time from the Johannine record. Those who are regenerated are described by Jesus in the dialogue with Nicodemus as born 'ἄνωθεν', which could be equally well translated 'from above'. Indeed, the emphasis in the next part of the treatment of this mysterious theme is essentially on the 'above': this regeneration is effected by the 'Wind of Heaven', which does not obey human direction but baffles human prediction. The result is that those who are thus regenerated are characterized in their manifestation and progress by being strangely unaccountable and unpredictable: 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit.' (John iii. 8.) This is opposed to the idea of natural birth, 'of the flesh'; which, in turn, recalls some words concerning those who believe in the Word made flesh, in the Prologue of this same Gospel. Not all who appeared to be 'His own' were actually such. On the whole, they 'received Him not'; but there were those who did receive Him, and who, by believing in Him, became the rightful children of God. This, however, was not the result of their own gratuitous choice; neither were they influenced or coerced by human persuasion; nor was it due to their belonging to a particular race or tradition. On the contrary, they are described as being 'born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.' (John i. 13.) The phrase 'ἐκ θεοῦ' is most significant. It conveys a sense of mysterious irresistible sovereignty. The full sense of it is vividly felt by its use in an altogether different context. Gamaliel is giving his judgment on the work of the apostles in an emergency meeting of the Sanhedrin. Speaking out of a mind deeply informed by consummate study of the Rabbinical teaching on the sovereign counsels of Jehovah, he utters his judgment: if the work of these men is 'ἐκ θεοῦ' then it will be irresistible, invincible in its success. (Acts v. 39.)

II. THE VALIDITY OF THE INTERPRETATION

These and other Scriptures are accordingly advanced in the *Confession of Faith* in support of the doctrine that God in the Three Persons is the sovereign determining cause and agent in the calling and saving of believers by His grace, and that this grace must consequently be deemed 'irresistible'. But by no means all would agree that such teaching can be deduced from these passages; though some would agree that while sufficient grace is given to enable all to 'believe, this grace cannot be effective unless the co-operation of the will is given, and also sustained. They would, nevertheless, uphold the position of 'soli fideism, and defend it in the face of the hottest opposition. So Arminius, on at least one occasion, defended this gospel of 'faith-alone' in open debate with a certain Jesuit. The latter put forward the usual Jesuit argument of a grace conferred in baptism which gave man the initiative in meriting his salvation, at the same time accusing the learned Dutch divine of destroying free will. Arminius indignantly reposted as follows: 'Man determines himself, but not without grace; for free will is in concurrence with grace, so that in determining, the one does not act without the other.'

A valid criticism of this reply is that it advances little beyond the Jesuit

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position, which looks at least half-way back to the teaching of Pelagius. To assert that Divine Grace does not act without free will is tantamount to declaring that God does not work without

human initiative. But this, in the judgment of those who stand with Arminius, is apparently no great catastrophe. The Anglican Whitby, who wrote voluminously against the 'Five Points' of the Synod of Dort, contends that God's grace is not some mysterious power imparted to man, but only 'imports His favour and His kind affection to us.' It manifests itself in various acts of Divine beneficence and operates in particular in the salvation of man, by providing him with the means of grace, for instance, the preaching of the Gospel. The 'free grace of God' is therefore the calling of men to the knowledge of salvation by Christ. The 'call' is the 'grace': therefore, the response is entirely a matter for human initiative. It presupposes an inherent ability on the part of man to obey the call. The inward operation of the Spirit is another 'grace'; but this is confined to the illumination of the mind, thereby to produce convictions and motives which may lead to conversion; though not through any infusion of supernatural energy, because the convictions and motives are strong enough in themselves to produce a sufficient inward change of temper which could lead to conversion. In answer to the objection that such a definition of the work of the Spirit scarcely warrants the description of it in such phrases as 'new creation' and 'new birth', Dr. Whitby replies with perfect urbanity that these phrases are in any case purely figurative. He calls to his support the Greek Fathers, who, according to him, comment unanimously that 'new creation' means no more than 'μεταβολήν εἰς τὸ κρεῖττον' (a change for the better). In like manner he dispatches the mystery of regeneration by explaining it as no more than a volitional moral and spiritual change, on the ground that the phrase has also been used in pagan authors to describe the embracing of a new system of philosophy. Thus lightly is the wound of controversy healed!

Such terms, however, do not measure up to the conception of the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit which the Scriptures, and especially the New Testament Scriptures, clearly express. The argument that there is a kind of balance between the grace of God and the free will of man in the operation of the call to salvation introduces an inevitable bathos which, in conception, weakens the very antithesis that must of necessity be felt between God and man. The force of this argument may be amply illustrated by dealing in a similar manner with the old proverb, 'Man proposes, God disposes.' That is an antithesis, the implications of which are self-evident. But if it were followed by some such qualification as, 'But it depends on the strength of man's proposal', then the antithesis would be reduced to a bathos, evacuating the proverb of all its meaning. To talk of a balance between the grace of God and the free will of man is to say in effect that the controlling factor is the will of man, when it is also asserted that God on His side wills man's salvation. A more serious implication of such an argument is that God apparently cannot overcome the willpower of one of His creatures! Moreover the idea of a balance between Divine grace and human volition involves the possibility, even the probability, that man will alternately accept and reject, presenting the somewhat undignified spectacle of a theological see-saw, with Divine grace on one end and human free will on the other, the pivot being some neutral point between them both. Girardeau goes further in pointing the apparent absurdity of this notion by

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recalling the ass, in the parable of Buridan, which died of hunger between two equally attractive bundles of hay. But the objection of St. Augustine is worthy of more serious consideration; for those who follow Arminius recoil from the alleged absurdity of their position by contending that

human free will is not the ultimate cause of election, and some go so far in emphasizing the overruling of Divine sovereignty that, quite inconsistently, they leave little room for man's free will to manoeuvre. Taking his stand on Romans ix. 16, St. Augustine declares: 'If the will of man is denied to be the cause of election, because it is not the sole cause but only the part, so also we may say that it is not of mercy, but of him who wills and runs; for where there is mutual co-operation there ought to be a reciprocal commendation: but unquestionably the latter sentiment falls through its own absurdity.'

There is another even more weighty reason why the conception of a balance between free-will and electing grace must be deemed absurd. If it is arguable that man is in some limited sense a free agent, it is altogether untenable that he is in any sense uncommitted: he is 'sold under sin' and, therefore, does not enjoy the spiritual freedom with which to determine his own saving response. Furthermore, unless God in His mercy will take the initiative, by an effectual call, then man is eternally doomed, and grace is not sufficient but deficient at the very point where it should prove to be most efficient. Such contingencies as right upbringing, right temperament, right mood and right circumstances would themselves become the determining elements in his ultimate destiny. 'Divine' election would, by this token, turn upon an existential confluence of circumstances and influences.

III. NORMATIVE STATEMENTS IN SCRIPTURE

The bearing of this present study, however, has not been taken without due regard to the obvious difficulties that beset the attempt to establish the doctrine of irresistible grace firmly on the authority of Scripture. Many statements of Scripture could be, and have been, advanced as evidence against this doctrine. But in 'comparing Scripture with Scripture' an important question must be answered, namely, What must one regard as normative, fixed and invariable? A similar question must be settled by the mariner as he sets out to sea. Are there fixed standards for navigation, and if so what are they? One might suggest the level of the ocean, the shape of the waves, the direction of the wind. All these are in some way connected with navigation, but none of them is fixed, indeed it would be dangerous to regard them as in any way normative. Even the compass itself cannot be regarded as absolutely invariable. But if the mariner looks up to the heavens he will find the answer there. Among the multitude of the stars there are fixed points which, if he takes his bearing from them, will guide him infallibly, even though everything else varies. So it is with the truths of the Scripture. There are many passages which speak of the response of man, or the lack of it, the level of his enthusiasm in seeking God, the shape of the circumstances which may either encourage or discourage him in his adventurous voyage through life. But if he attempts to take any of these as fixed points, he is bound to go off course, because every one of them is variable. But there are also passages which bid him look above to the sovereign grace of

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God, and this, like the Pole Star, is the supreme fixed point from which he may infallibly take his bearing. While human response may be variable, the electing grace of God is normative, and therefore other truths must be delimited in their expression and interpreted in such a way that they are consistent with that Master Truth. Grace, according to the Scripture, is the one fixed,

invariable and invincible element in man's redemption, which is entirely of God, through God, and for the glory of God alone.

When God is speaking as if pressed to give a reason why He chose Israel, He declares: 'I chose you because I set my love upon you.' (Dent. vii. 7.) The gospel promise of free forgiveness and reconciliation comes to a stubbornly unresponsive nation through the prophet Isaiah; but the Lord announces it as entirely of His grace: 'I have blotted out your sins for my own sake.' (Isa. xlv. 22.) It is not surprising that this conception of Divine Grace reaches its fullest expression in the New Covenant. Jeremiah proclaims the terms of the New Covenant of pardoning and renewing grace at a time of national apostasy, when Jerusalem was ripe for judgment. The New Testament carries this theme on to its fullest realization. Grace operates even when man is at the lowest ebb of responsiveness, it proves most irresistible when man is most rebellious against God!

IV. THE CONVERSION OF SAUL: A NORMATIVE CASE?

At this point it is appropriate to study a case of conversion which the Christian Church was obviously meant to regard as a sort of prototype. Paul almost uses this word when referring to his conversion in his letter to Timothy: 'for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting.' (1 Tim. i. 16.) The words 'ἔμοι πρότῳ' do not mean that Paul was converted first in order of time, but foremost as an example, 'πρὸς ὑποτύπωσιν'. (The word 'prototype' would not be a bad translation!) As an instance of the operation of irresistible grace, the example is crystal clear: here is a man who is doggedly pursuing a course in direct opposition to the will and purpose of God. Yet he was stopped short in his course and radically changed. According to the testimony of Luke, Paul later declared that it was a matter of conscience with him to do everything he could against the name of Jesus. If ever electing grace could be effectively resisted, it would have been in the case of Saul of Tarsus! But he describes his conversion in most significant terms, again in the first letter to Timothy: 'and the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.' (1 Tim. i. 14) The word 'ὑπερπλεόνασεν' describes vividly and graphically the operation of a grace which swept irresistibly into his soul, enabling him to respond in faith and love. Not every believer has such a vivid, overwhelmingly sudden experience; but in principle this is the pattern for all. Circumstances may differ vastly, some may not even have a perceptible crisis, nevertheless, in all believers, saving faith is the result of an invasion of the soul by irresistible grace. Paul was the best qualified of all to expound this doctrine, and he does so with the utmost clarity. Some scholars maintain that the Apostle had a predilection for this doctrine because of his

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rabbinical training, 'at the feet of Gamaliel', who, as has already been noted, placed a strong emphasis upon the sovereign counsels of God. Other scholars go so far as to confuse the doctrine, as later propounded by Augustine and Calvin, with the idea of the irresistible compulsion of the Absolute in Stoical philosophy. But any parallel with either rabbinical or stoical teaching need not prejudice the issue, as Jonathan Edwards remarks, in his treatise on Free will: 'There were many important truths maintained by the ancient Greek and Roman

philosophers, and especially the Stoics, that are never the worse for being held by them.... We need not reject all truth which is demonstrated by clear evidence, merely because it was once held by some bad man. This great truth, "that Jesus is the Son of God", was not spoiled because it was once and again proclaimed with a loud voice by the devil.' (*Works*, vol. 1, p. 69, sect. vi.)

It is, however, of the nature of revelation that it comes not so much as new truth, but new understanding of truth; and in this sense Paul's very conversion story has come to be regarded as part of the canonical testimony, and his exposition of the doctrine of it normative.

The Apostle Paul in one place (Rom. ix. 15) uses as a proof-text the words of the Lord to Moses, in response to his request, 'I beseech thee shew me thy glory.' The reply amounts to a significant variation on the Divine Name, (Exod. xxxiii. 18, 19) taken in the future tense: 'I will be that I am.' (cf. Exod. iii. 14). The complement is now made explicit: 'I will be *gracious*', and receives further clarification: 'I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious.' Paul is quoting from the Septuagint, which shows that the relative clause is not a definite particularization but indefinite construction—'ὃν ἂν ἐλεῶ'. It is of the essence of God's glory that He is gracious and that His grace is also inscrutable. The indefinite (whosoever) 'ὃν ἂν' can become particular and personal only because He declares 'ἐλεήσω', I will have mercy. Calvin comments here: 'The only cause of salvation is expressed in the two words used by Moses. The first *chānan* which means to favour or to show kindness freely and bountifully; the other *rācham* which is "to treat with mercy". Thus is confirmed what Paul intended that the mercy of God, being gratuitous, is under no restraint, but turns wherever it pleases.' (Calvin's *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*; ad. loc.) Paul's own deduction from this expression of the inscrutable wisdom of God is: 'So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that hath mercy.' It is not the purpose of this study to deal with the negative aspect of this in the doctrine of reprobation, but a further comment from Calvin will serve as a warning to those whose craving after logical speculations leads them beyond even the twilight fringes of revelation: 'For of those things which it is neither granted nor lawful to know, the ignorance is well learned: the coveting of knowledge a kind of madness.'

V. THE BEARING OF THE DOCTRINE ON THE CONCEPTION OF GOD

Not least in importance in considering the doctrine of irresistible grace is the discovery of its essential bearing on an adequate conception of God. Commenting on the same place in Romans, Barth has some significant words to say on this point: 'If we conceive God as conformed to our human ideas, as one cause in a series, as one factor among other factors, He is not the Cause, the Absolute,

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the Eternal, Personal God—but rather the "No-God".' (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*; ad. loc.)

The serious deficiency in the doctrine of the invincibility of man's will is that it leads to an altogether unworthy conception of God, which the Scripture nowhere bears out. To those who object to the apparent arbitrariness of the decrees of God, Paul rejoins: 'Who are thou, O man,

that disputest with God?' (Rom. ix. 20.) The antithesis implied in this rhetorical question is overwhelming in its logic, meaning virtually: 'Let God be God!'

For the prophet Isaiah the very thing which distinguishes Jehovah from the heathen idols is that He decrees events which infallibly come to pass; whereas they cannot even speak, much less prophesy. Being entirely unable to take the initiative, they are in no sense causes: they are only results of the religious fancy and caprice of the men who made them. They are in short 'no-gods', non-entities. Jehovah, on the other hand, is the Living God, Who is inscrutable in His wisdom and in all His ways. 'Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him in the path of judgment?' (Isa. xl. 13).

The doctrine of irresistible grace is entirely consonant with this lofty conception of God. In the salvation of man, He is not just one of a chain of causes, but the Cause: if there is a chain of causation, any action of man can be designated only a 'contingent' cause. God initiates the process, determines the means, and works through invincibly to the end. If an analysis is desired according to the category of causes, it might appear in the following way: First Cause, God the Father; Formal Cause, the Word Incarnate; Efficient Cause, the The Holy Spirit. There are however 'contingent causes', as has already been mentioned, but these, such as upbringing, circumstances, mental capacity, temperament, and mood, may be all or severally caught up into the one great sovereign purpose of God and used by Him according to His good pleasure. But to make any of these contingencies a cause, in its own right, of salvation, would be to make nonsense of the whole conception of the sovereignty of God in man's redemption. Some lay great emphasis on homiletical effectiveness, others on methods of evangelism, many more stress the need for an immediate decision. All these are important, but not one could be said to be the determining cause in a man's conversion. The only determining cause is irresistible grace, which works mysteriously and inscrutably sometimes with these contingencies, sometimes without them, though in pastoral theology the means God approves for the conversion of souls must be studied and used diligently, especially the 'proclamation' of the Word.

VI. THE DIFFERENTIA OF THE WORKINGS OF GRACE

At this point it is relevant to consider the *differentia* of grace and the work of the Spirit. In the case of believers it may be said that '*experientia ipsa docet*', that grace is irresistible. But does 'experience' teach the same in the case of unbelievers? Many men do in fact seem to resist it, and even show evidence of some real effects of the 'good hand of God' in their lives before they finally turn away from God altogether. But these cannot be said to have experienced the

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saving grace of God. Grace in effectual calling is irresistible; but the grace of God is 'manifold', and there are many probing, or proving, operations of the Holy Spirit which man can and does resist. It is in this sense that the warfare between God's Spirit and the carnal spirit of man is to be understood, in passages like: 'My Spirit shall not always strive with man,' (Gen. vi. 3) an ominous statement which indicates that the race is ripe for the first great judgment of the Flood. Paul harks back to this realistic view of human nature in his teaching on practical Christian living

in his letter to the Galatians: 'For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh.' (Gal. v. 17.) But Stephen at the climax of his speech before the Sanhedrin uses the most uncompromising terms: 'Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost...' (Acts vii. 51.) Grace resisted? The work of the Spirit frustrated? Apparently so, but not the infusing of a new obedience in 'effectual calling'. There are manifold influences of grace; there are divers operations of the Holy Spirit. God often proceeds with some of the preliminary operations of the Spirit in order to prove what is in men's hearts. This is what He did with recalcitrant Israel in the wilderness: 'I led thee all this way to prove what was in thy heart.' (Deut. viii. 2.) These probings can be, and often are, resisted; moreover, because these 'tastings of the Spirit' are often confused with the genuine '*praeparatio evangelica*' of effectual calling, some are said to be converted when in actual fact they are not. They may be led into an emotional state which is mistaken for saving faith, even assurance, when no such deep and effectual work of the Spirit has commenced. Then, after a period of entirely unsatisfactory discipleship, they may fall away again into grosser unbelief and greater spiritual blindness than ever before. Some are brought to see their spiritual inadequacy, and only then does an effectual call take place, issuing in real spiritual conversion. That is why such passages as Hebrews vi. have been written, and it is because of the presence of such tentative and inadequate disciples in the church that believers are exhorted to 'make their calling and election sure', and warned that 'only he that endureth to the end shall be saved'. Such *argumenta ad hominem*, however, must be understood only in relation to the normative governing truth that God's sovereign election 'standeth sure' and that in the effectual call grace is irresistible.

Finally, a brief consideration of the great spiritual strength of such a doctrine will serve to accentuate its value for pastoral ministry. Pascal's, experience of God was such that he could see it only as a free and sovereign act of God. He was thankful for the influence of the 'Gentlemen of the Port Royal' and the family circumstances which led to his conversion. But the penetration of his 'Thoughts' led him to see that in and through everything worked the irresistible grace of God, and the evidence of its working was in the circumstances of his seeking:

'Tu ne me chercherais pas, si to ne m'avais déjà trouvé.'

It is an immense encouragement to those engaged in the cure of souls to know that true heartfelt seeking after God is evidence of the incipient working of effectual grace. It is of the greatest strength also in evangelistic ministry to have the assurance that God's word will not return unto Him void, but will prosper in the thing whereto He sent it.