

A Short Defense of the Doctrine of Irresistible Grace

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In this article we hope to prove to the reader's satisfaction the scriptural truthfulness of the doctrine of irresistible grace. This doctrine asserts that the quickening power of God's Spirit will be irresistibly imposed upon all the elect at some point in their lives. Therefore all chosen in Christ will experience the new birth before departing this life. We are firmly persuaded that this doctrine is absolutely essential to soundness in the general doctrine of salvation.

Now the skeptic might immediately object that the doctrine of irresistible grace presupposes the doctrine of election, and that one will never prove the former without establishing the latter. However, if it can be shown that God's Holy Spirit is irresistibly imposed upon some, then election is thereby largely confirmed, because it is certain that God's Spirit is not irresistibly imposed upon all. Therefore, election is implied by irresistible grace inasmuch as some are chosen for such grace while it is obvious that others are not. Moreover, it is an *unmerited* election that is implied by irresistible grace, for what purpose is served in applying *irresistible* grace to those offering no resistance?

Since the third chapter of John contains some of the most important scriptures treating the new birth, we would expect it to say something of irresistible grace if the doctrine were indeed true. In fact a very important text comes from the eighth verse. Here the Lord says, *The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.* Therefore, as the wind is sovereign and irresistible in its course (it *bloweth where it listeth*), so likewise is the Holy Spirit in His work of the new birth. He undertakes the spiritual quickening when and where He pleases, and His efforts never prove abortive.

Further observe that there are no exceptions to the rule of John 3:8, *for so is every one that is born of the Spirit.* Therefore, if it can be shown that some are quickened under the power of irresistible grace, then it must be concluded that all are quickened under that same power.

Perhaps the clearest and most remarkable case of irresistible grace in the scriptures is that of the Apostle Paul's. He was set in total resistance to the Christ and the gospel, but was then changed to one of the greatest of all advocates of Christ. As remarkable as Paul's case may be, we may nonetheless conclude that irresistible grace pertains to all, *for so is every one that is born of the Spirit.* This is further confirmed by Paul's own statement in I Timothy 1:16 - *Howbeit 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.* Which confirms Paul's case to be that of all believers inasmuch as Paul's case is a *pattern* for theirs.

Jesus said in John 6:37, *All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. For I came down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.* Therefore, the salvation of

those given to Christ is an absolute certainty. However, Jesus also said in John 3:3, *Verily, verily I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.* It follows that all given to Christ will certainly be born again. But how could such certainty be achieved without the irresistible intervention of God?

Clearly, irresistible grace must pertain to those given to Christ in John 6:37. Now suppose that election is denied, notwithstanding the clear implications of John 6:37, and that persons apart from those given to Christ will finally be saved. Then these too must be the subjects of irresistible grace, *for so is every one that is born of the Spirit.*

It is unfortunate that John 3:16 is seldom understood within the light that John 3:8 casts upon it. John 3:16 clearly asserts that true believers in Jesus are saved. It therefore teaches us about the *proof* of salvation. However, it says little about the *cause* of salvation. The cause of salvation can be discovered only after determining the cause of belief, but John 3:16 says nothing of this. Unfortunately, the typical Christian interjects an untenable hypothesis at this point by assuming belief to be caused by the autonomous decision of the individual. But it is logically impossible to have an autonomous individual and, at the same time, a Holy Spirit imposing a sovereign and irresistible force such as the wind. Clearly, the usual hypothesis supporting verse 16 is at odds with the implications of verse 8.

It is totally unnecessary to interject any hypothesis on this point for John 3:16 together with John 3:8 settle the matter: Belief is caused by the sovereign and irresistible power of the Holy Spirit upon the heart (John 3:8). This belief is in turn the proof of salvation (John 3:16).

It should further be observed that as the Spirit moves *where it listeth* in the work of the new birth, it cannot be deterred by the inability or unwillingness of man to disperse that gospel. We are compelled to conclude that either: 1) The Spirit uniformly uses the gospel as a means to the new birth, in which event the Spirit must compel men to preach the gospel to all who are to be born again, or 2) The Spirit may quicken without the agency of man, in which event the Spirit must quicken apart from the gospel or else become itself the preacher. We will not pursue this at length since it would carry us from our topic. Suffice it to say that the latter must be true because of scriptural statements concerning infants (Matthew 11:25, Matthew 21:16, and Luke 1:15) and scriptural statements concerning limitations on man's ability to deliver the gospel (Matthew 9:37, Romans 15:31, and II Thessalonians 3:1).

We may also infer the doctrine of irresistible grace from scriptures teaching the spiritual incapacity of natural man. For example, I Corinthians 2:14 reads, *But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.* Since natural man is both unwilling and unable to receive *spiritual things*, then it must certainly be the case that he is neither willing nor able to receive the Holy Spirit Himself. How is he then to experience the spiritual birth? Clearly, this can happen only if the Spirit irresistibly imposes Himself.

But the objector will likely assert that this is an oversimplification. That in fact the Spirit partially capacitates the man to spiritual things, at which point the man must properly direct his own will for completion of the spiritual birth. Supposing this to be true, then what if the Spirit

were to be successfully resisted in all of this? Then the intents of the Spirit could be frustrated by the uncooperation of man, and it could not be properly said that the Spirit worketh *where it listeth*. We must conclude that the will of man has no *active* part in the spiritual birth, but his *passive* response will be that of Psalms 110:3 - *Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power...* According, *The preparations of the heart in man, and the answer of the tongue, is from the Lord* (Proverbs 16:1).

On this point, the Lord establishes yet another unappreciated truth in John three when He says in verse six, *That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*. This truth derives from a principle governing all of God's creation; namely, that God has so arranged that like begets like in all things. A horse has never contributed to the birth of a cow; likewise, a natural man cannot contribute toward the birth of a spiritual man, either in himself or others. The claim that natural man contributes to any degree toward his spiritual origin is contrary not only to the express statement of the Lord, but also to all that we know about God from the creation.

Furthermore, were the cooperation of man required in the spiritual birth, then *spiritual birth* becomes a gross misnomer, for what living creature ever contributed toward its birth? Indeed, all scriptural analogies to the acquisition of spiritual life convey the truth of irresistible grace. These analogies include:

- 1) a birth - John 1:11-13, John 3:3-8
- 2) a quickening - Ephesians 2:1-5, Colossians 2:13
- 3) a translation - Colossians 1:12,13
- 4) a resurrection - John 5:25-29
- 5) a creation - II Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:10

Clearly, no creature ever contributed toward its own creation. Accordingly, the dead cannot contribute toward their own resurrection. In fact all of these analogies suggest an irresistible power working on a passive object. We are compelled by their collective preponderance to conclude that irresistible grace is an irresistible truth.

As any truth will harmonize with all scriptures, likewise the doctrine of irresistible grace accords perfectly with the numerous scriptures asserting that spiritual life derives from the will of God and not from the will of man. For example, John 1:13 tells us that we were born *not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God*. We may also add: John 5:21, Romans 9:11-16, II Timothy 1:9-10, Hebrews 10:7-10, and others.

But what of the texts that speak of quenching the Spirit (I Thessalonians 5:19) or of grieving the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30)? It is important to understand that the doctrine of irresistible grace refers to the work of the Spirit in the new birth only. It is clear from both scriptures and experience that the Spirit does not irresistibly impose Himself in all matters. The Lord's people can cause the power of the Spirit to be diminished in their lives through apathy, disobedience, and departures from the truth (e.g. I Corinthians 3:1 and Galatians 3:3). Accordingly, texts referring to the Spirit being quenched, grieved, etc. have no reference to the new birth, but are admonitions to those

who have already experienced the new birth. May we ever proclaim the truth of irresistible grace and its accompanying doctrines that this never become the case among us.