

IRRESISTIBLE GRACE

The “I” in TULIP — The Holy Spirit’s Effectual Call

- Irresistible grace (also called efficacious grace or effectual calling) concerns the application of Christ’s saving benefits to the lives of God’s people.
- In summary: the Holy Spirit never fails to bring to salvation those sinners whom he personally calls to Christ.

Westminster Confession of Faith 10.1 (Of Effectual Calling)

All those — and only those — whom God has predestined to life, he is pleased to call effectually in his appointed and accepted time, by his Word and Spirit. He calls them from the state of sin and death to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ. In this calling, God enlightens their minds spiritually and savingly, takes away their hearts of stone and gives them hearts of flesh, renews their wills, and by his almighty power turns them to what is good and effectually draws them to Jesus Christ — yet in such a way that they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.

The Triune God in Salvation

- **The Father** before the foundation of the world, elected some to everlasting life and gave them to his Son to be his people.
- **The Son** at the appointed time, came into the world to secure and accomplish their redemption.
- **The Holy Spirit** applies the work of redemption and Christ’s benefits to the hearts of the elect.

Answering a Caricature: Grace That Frees, Not Forces

Irresistible grace does not mean God drags unwilling sinners into heaven “kicking and screaming.” The Confession is careful to say the Spirit renews the will from within, not overrides it from without. The sinner is drawn “most freely, being made willing by his grace.” Grace does not force the will against its nature; it transforms the nature so the will freely turns to Christ (**John 6:37; Philippians 2:13**).

Nor is grace withheld from sincere seekers who are simply not elect. Scripture teaches that apart from grace, no one truly seeks God (**Romans 3:11**). Genuine, persistent seeking is itself evidence the Spirit is already at work, not proof that grace has been refused. The elect are not resistant seekers turned away; they are rebels made willing.

Canons of Dort — Third & Fourth Heads of Doctrine, Article 11 (1619)

The Spirit pervades the inmost recesses of man; he opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised and quickens the dead.

KEY POINTS

1. The gospel invitation extends an outward call to all who hear the message, which can be and often is rejected. In addition, the Holy Spirit extends a special, inward call to the elect only. This call cannot be rejected and always results in conversion.

Romans 8:30 *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

Also see: Jude 1; 1 Peter 1:15; 2 Timothy 1:9; Acts 7:51 (“you always resist the Holy Spirit”)

2. Through regeneration, or the new birth, sinners are given spiritual life and made children of God. The sovereign work of the Holy Spirit is in no way dependent on human cooperation.

John 1:12–13 *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*

Also see: Ephesians 2:4–5 (spiritual resurrection); 2 Corinthians 5:17–18 (new creation); Ezekiel 36:26–27 (new heart)

3. Sinners, through regeneration, are brought into the Kingdom of God; the Holy Spirit is the one who regenerates the heart.

John 3:3–8 *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God ... unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”*

4. Through the Spirit's work, dead sinners are given a new heart and made to walk in God's law.

Ezekiel 36:26–27 *And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

Also see: Deuteronomy 30:6 (“the Lord your God will circumcise your heart”); 2 Corinthians 5:17

5. The Holy Spirit raises the sinner from a state of spiritual death to a state of spiritual life.

Ephesians 2:4–6 *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*

6. God gives the gift of faith and repentance through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 2:8–9 *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Also see: Acts 11:18 (“granted repentance”); Acts 13:48; 2 Timothy 2:24–25

Key Takeaway: Regeneration Precedes Faith

The Holy Spirit must first create a new heart, or a new nature, within fallen man before he can exercise saving faith. Apart from a new heart, a sinner cannot exercise faith and repentance. But when the Spirit of God changes the heart, the sinner is drawn to Christ freely.

Reformed vs. Arminian View of Grace

Reformed View		Arminian View
The Call	An outward general call goes to all who hear the gospel, plus a special inward call to the elect alone.	The Spirit calls inwardly all who are reached by the outward gospel invitation. The call is extended to everyone.
Can It Be Resisted?	The external call may be rejected; the internal call to the elect cannot be resisted. It always results in conversion.	Because man is free, he can successfully resist the Spirit's call. Grace does not overpower the will.
Role of the Will	The Spirit graciously causes the elect to believe and come freely. He is not dependent on man's cooperation.	Man's free will limits the Spirit. Faith must occur before regeneration is possible.
Order of Salvation	Regeneration precedes and enables faith. A new heart is given first, and belief freely follows.	Faith precedes the new birth. The Spirit cannot regenerate a sinner until that sinner first believes.
Nature of Grace	God's grace is invincible. It never ultimately fails to bring the elect to salvation.	God's grace is not invincible. It can be, and often is, resisted and thwarted by man.