

## PAUL AND THE COLOSSIANS

Colossae was the location of a Christian community to which the Apostle Paul addressed a canonically accepted epistle which is known for its exaltation of the supremacy of Christianity. One aim of the letter was to address the challenges that the community faced in its context of the syncretistic Gnostic religions that were developing in Asia minor. Syncretism is defined as “the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought”.

The false teachers interposed a barrier between God and God’s people. They thought of elemental spirits that stood in the way and permitted access to God only by the path of asceticism or special knowledge. In the face of all such claims, Paul stresses the supremacy of Christ, who is “the image of the invisible God,” the one who brought creation about and holds it together, supreme over creation, preeminent in everything. And together with all this, he is “the head of the body, the church,” the one who made peace by the blood he shed on the cross (1:15-20). This combination of the greatness of Christ and of his saving work for the believing runs through the epistle. It makes nonsense of any claim that other powers are involved in bringing people to God or that meritorious practices like asceticism pave the way. (D. A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo - An Introduction to the New Testament)

*For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with **the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding**,<sup>10</sup> so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and **increasing in the knowledge of God**; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously<sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.<sup>13</sup> For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:9-14)*

### FIRSTBORN OF ALL CREATION

*And He is the image of the invisible God, **the first-born of all creation**.<sup>16</sup> For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created by Him and for Him.<sup>17</sup> And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17)*

### FIRSTBORN OF THE NEW CREATION

*He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, **the first-born from the dead**; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.<sup>19</sup> For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him,<sup>20</sup> and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (Colossians 1:18 - 20)*

The FIRST-BORN in the patriarchal age was heir to the majority of his father's property (Deuteronomy 21:17). The firstborn also inherited the patriarchal rule over the family, as in the case of Jacob who usurped Esau's first-born blessing and became also the patriarch of God's covenant people of that time. Isaac blessed Jacob thinking he was Esau with "May peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you; be master of your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you" (Gen. 27:29). During the monarchical period, David received the birthright of a firstborn from God who made him the highest of the kings of the earth (Psalms 89:27) as David's inheritance prefigured the greater inheritance of Jesus, son of David.

When Paul called Jesus, the Son of God the First-born over all creation, he is acknowledging him as the heir and ruler from the beginning of time. He rules over all Creation – "because in him all things were created, in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16). Death could not hold him for he rules over death, and he became the first-born from the dead! And he brought forth the new creation, the Church! "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Through the death and resurrection of Christ, the believer is recreated to become conformed to the image of his Son who is the Head of his new people and who shares his inheritance with his people. How often men try to run the church to conform her to his own image. <sup>1</sup>

#### SYNCRETISM IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- Genesis account of Creation. The Trinitarian God was the Creator of all things visible and invisible in the heaven and on earth. (Genesis 1). Pagan mythology would differ.
- Satan's deception to Eve - The creature to become like the Creator - "You surely shall not die! <sup>5</sup> "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Gen. 3:4)
- The ungodly line of Cain - Man became polygamous, and tyrannous kings who act like gods, challenging and ignoring God's laws (Genesis 4:19-24) versus the godly line of Seth who called on the name of the Lord (i.e., God's image bearers (Genesis 4:26), walking with God and are blessed and become blessings).

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<sup>1</sup> Baugh, Steven M., "Firstborn Over All" [*Kerux: NWTS* 1/3 (Dec 1986) 28-34]

- The descendants of Canaan, Ham's son became the idolatrous Canaanites who worshipped many gods and were destroyed by God's judgement through the Israelites in the conquest of the Promised Land.
- Sodom and Gomorrah were cities that defied God's ordained marriage laws of relationships.
- Balaam, the son of Beor, the diviner's teaching Balak stumbled the Israelites into idolatry. (Numbers 22, 31, Jude 1:11, Rev. 2:14). Peter described Balaam as "Balaam, the *son* of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness, but he received a rebuke for his own transgression; *for* a dumb donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet. These are springs without water, and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. For speaking out arrogant *words* of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved" (2 Peter 2:15-19).

**Syncretism** is the combining of different beliefs, while blending practices of various [schools of thought](#). Syncretism involves the merging or assimilation of several originally discrete [traditions](#), especially in the [theology](#) and [mythology](#) of [religion](#), thus asserting an underlying unity and allowing for an [inclusive](#) approach to other faiths. Syncretism also occurs commonly in expressions of arts and culture (known as [eclecticism](#)) as well as politics ([syncretic politics](#)).<sup>2</sup>

#### SOME FORMS OF SYNCRETISM TODAY

- Buddhist Christians – movement started in the early 1980s
- Islam – Christ is a Prophet like Mohammed but lower in stature than Mohammed.
- Jesus considered one of the many gods of Hinduism. That makes their theology, right?
- Mormonism Gnosticism – Jesus is one of their many demi-gods.
- Hegelian idea that Pauline Christology as being simply the Jewish conception of the Messiah and derived from paganism.
- Theory of Evolution in Christianity
- Rationalism, Emmanuel Kant. The Bible is uninspired literature book. This destroys the doctrine of the Incarnation.
- The temptation of magic. Rationalization that magic is of God. e.g. Eve thinking the forbidden fruit is magical, Israelites using the ark as a talisman against the Philistines, Harry Potter books, the zodiac system, palmistry etc. The Canaanites use of the occult, child sacrifice, divination as a means to control their destiny. Balaam's strategy of immorality and idolatry to stumble the Israelites.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syncretism#Religious\\_syncretism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syncretism#Religious_syncretism)

- The Emergent Church vs. the 5 “*solas*” of the Reformation -- What of *sola Scriptura*, the Reformers’ declaration that the Christian’s authority is Scripture alone? What of *sola gratia*, salvation by grace alone? What of *solus Christus*, the truth that salvation is through Christ alone? What of *sola fide*, justification by faith alone? And does the Emergent Church believe in *solī Deo gloria*, that the glory belongs to God alone?

This definition of “emergence” has its roots in the philosophy of a man named Ken Wilber, who mixes elements of Christianity, Buddhism, New Age, and Eastern philosophies into his so-called religious practice. The Emergent Church movement is unabashedly postmodernist. Their only absolute is that there are no absolutes. Feelings and experience preclude the acceptance of propositional truth. Emergent “truth” comes through dialogue and consensus, and therefore today’s “truth” is not necessarily tomorrow’s. Theology is “conversational.” Truth itself is “emergent.”<sup>3</sup>

## PAUL’S MESSAGE TO THE COLOSSIANS

### INDICATIVES

- Delivered from darkness into the Kingdom of Jesus Christ – the Regeneration.
- Changing loyalty and citizenship from the world to heaven.
- Who is Jesus? The God-man, the First-born of all creation – the image of the invisible God.
- Sovereignty of God for your peace of mind
- Providence of God in the light of the covenant we have in him.
- Prayer for wisdom and knowledge for in “whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Col 2:3 NAS)
- The Holy Spirit to teach, guide and counsel

### IMPERATIVES

- Be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding
- So that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please him in all respects
- Bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

## JESUS THE FIRST-BORN OF GOD, THE HIGHEST OF THE KINGS OF THE EARTH

### FIRST BORN OF ALL CREATION

<sup>5</sup> And He is the image of the invisible God, **the first-born of all creation.** <sup>16</sup> For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=269>

or rulers or authorities-- all things have been created by Him and for Him. <sup>17</sup> And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

#### FIRSTBORN OF THE NEW CREATION

<sup>18</sup> He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, **the first-born from the dead**; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. <sup>9</sup> For it was the *Father's* good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him, <sup>20</sup> and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, *I say*, whether things on earth or things in heaven (Col 1:15-19 NAS)

Psalms 89:27 "I also shall make him **My<sup>a</sup>first-born, The highest of the kings of the earth**. <sup>28</sup> "My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever, And My covenant shall be confirmed to him. <sup>29</sup> "So I will establish his descendants forever, And his throne as the days of heaven.

Romans 8: 29 **For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren**; <sup>30</sup> and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Hebrews 12:22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, <sup>23</sup> to **the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven**, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,

Revelation 1: 4 John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; <sup>5</sup> and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, **the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth**. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood, <sup>6</sup> and He has made us *to be* a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him *be* the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

#### IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, THE FIRST-BORN IS IDENTIFIED AS CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH.

Therefore, by calling the Son of God the "Firstborn over all creation," Paul is acknowledging him as heir and ruler of the world from the beginning. And look at the lavish extent of his reign: all things, not all Eden, nor all Israel, nor even all the world, but ALL things—"because in him all things were created, in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16).

## WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH ON PROVIDENCE

I. God the great Creator of all things does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

II. Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

III. God, in His ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at His pleasure.

IV. The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.

V. The most wise, righteous, and gracious God does oftentimes leave, for a season, His own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.

VI. As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous Judge, for former sins, does blind and harden, from them He not only withhold His grace whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraws the gifts which they had, and exposes them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin; and, withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan, whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God uses for the softening of others.

VII. As the providence of God does, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it takes care of His Church, and disposes all things to the good thereof.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter V:1-7

## **TULIP Summary**

In a series of blog articles at [ligonier.org](http://ligonier.org) entitled "TULIP and Reformed Theology," Dr. R. C. Sproul provided a brief summary of the five points of Calvinism (also known as the Doctrines of Grace) expressed in the acrostic TULIP:

### **INTRODUCTION**

Just a few years before the Pilgrims landed on the shores of New England in the Mayflower, a controversy erupted in the Netherlands and spread throughout Europe and then around the world. It began within the theological faculty of a Dutch institution that was committed to Calvinistic teaching. Some of the professors there began to have second thoughts about issues relating to the doctrines of election and predestination. As this theological controversy spread across the country, it upset the church and theologians of the day. Finally, a synod was convened. Issues were squared away and the views of certain people were rejected, including those of a man by the name of Jacobus Arminius.

The group that led the movement against orthodox Reformed theology was called the Remonstrant. They were called the Remonstrant because they were remonstrating or protesting against certain doctrines within their own theological heritage. There were basically five doctrines that were the core of the controversy. As a result of this debate, these five core theological issues became known in subsequent generations as the "five points of Calvinism." They are now known through the very popular acrostic TULIP, which is a clever way to sum up the five articles that were in dispute. The five points, as they are stated in order to form the acrostic TULIP, are: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.

I mention this historical event because it would be a serious mistake to understand the essence of Reformed theology simply in light of these five doctrines—the Reformed faith involves many other elements of theological and ecclesiastical confession. However, these are the five controversial points of Reformed theology, and they are the ones that are popularly seen as distinctive to this particular confession. Over the next five posts, we are going to spend some time looking at these five points of Calvinism as they are spelled out in the acrostic TULIP.

### **TOTAL DEPRAVITY**

The doctrine of total depravity reflects the Reformed viewpoint of original sin. That term—original sin—is often misunderstood in the popular arena. Some people assume that the term original sin must refer to the first sin—the original transgression that we've all copied in many different ways

in our own lives, that is, the first sin of Adam and Eve. But that's not what original sin has referred to historically in the church. Rather, the doctrine of original sin defines the consequences to the human race because of that first sin.

Virtually every church historically that has a creed or a confession has agreed that something very serious happened to the human race as a result of the first sin—that first sin resulted in original sin. That is, as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, the entire human race fell, and our nature as human beings since the fall has been influenced by the power of evil. As David declared in the Old Testament, “Oh, God, I was born in sin, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalms 51:5). He was not saying that it was sinful for his mother to have borne children; neither was he saying that he had done something evil by being born. Rather, he was acknowledging the human condition of fallenness—that condition that was part of the experience of his parents, a condition that he himself brought into this world. Therefore, original sin has to do with the fallen nature of mankind. The idea is that we are not sinners because we sin, but that we sin because we are sinners.

In the Reformed tradition, total depravity does not mean utter depravity. We often use the term total as a synonym for utter or for completely, so the notion of total depravity conjures up the idea that every human being is as bad as that person could possibly be. You might think of an archfiend of history such as Adolf Hitler and say there was absolutely no redeeming virtue in the man, but I suspect that he had some affection for his mother. As wicked as Hitler was, we can still conceive of ways in which he could have been even more wicked than he actually was. So, the idea of total in total depravity doesn't mean that all human beings are as wicked as they can possibly be. It means that the fall was so serious that it affects the whole person. The fallenness that captures and grips our human nature affects our bodies; that's why we become ill and die. It affects our minds and our thinking; we still have the capacity to think, but the Bible says the mind has become darkened and weakened. The will of man is no longer in its pristine state of moral power. The will, according to the New Testament, is now in bondage. We are enslaved to the evil impulses and desires of our hearts. The body, the mind, the will, the spirit—indeed, the whole person—have been infected by the power of sin.

I like to replace the term total depravity with my favorite designation, which is radical corruption. Ironically, the word radical has its roots in the Latin word for “root,” which is *radix*, and it can be translated root or core. The term radical has to do with something that permeates to the core of a thing. It's not something that is tangential or superficial, lying on the surface. The Reformed view is that the effects of the fall extend or penetrate to the core of our being. Even the English word core actually comes from the Latin word *cor*, which means “heart.” That is, our sin is something that comes from our hearts. In biblical terms, that means it's from the core or very center of our existence.

So, what is required for us to be conformed to the image of Christ is not simply some small adjustments or behavioral modifications, but nothing less than renovation from the inside. We need



to be regenerated, to be made over again, to be quickened by the power of the Spirit. The only way in which a person can escape this radical situation is by the Holy Spirit's changing the core, the heart. However, even that change does not instantly vanquish sin. The complete elimination of sin awaits our glorification in heaven.

## UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

The Reformed view of election, known as unconditional election, means that God does not foresee an action or condition on our part that induces Him to save us. Rather, election rests on God's sovereign decision to save whomever He is pleased to save.

In the book of Romans, we find a discussion of this difficult concept. Romans 9:10–13 reads: “And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ As it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’” Here the Apostle Paul is giving his exposition of the doctrine of election. He deals with it significantly in Romans 8, but here he illustrates his teaching of the doctrine of election by going back into the past of the Jewish people and looking at the circumstances surrounding the birth of twins—Jacob and Esau. In the ancient world, it was customary for the firstborn son to receive the inheritance or the patriarchal blessing. However, in the case of these twins, God reversed the process and gave the blessing not to the elder but to the younger. The point that the Apostle labors here is that God not only makes this decision prior to the twins' births, He does it without a view to anything they would do, either good or evil, so that the purposes of God might stand. Therefore, our salvation does not rest on us; it rests solely on the gracious, sovereign decision of God.

This doesn't mean that God will save people whether they come to faith or not. There are conditions that God decrees for salvation, not the least of which is putting one's personal trust in Christ. However, that is a condition for justification, and the doctrine of election is something else. When we're talking about unconditional election, we're talking in a very narrow confine of the doctrine of election itself.

So, then, on what basis does God elect to save certain people? Is it on the basis of some foreseen reaction, response, or activity of the elect? Many people who have a doctrine of election or predestination look at it this way. They believe that in eternity past God looked down through the corridors of time and He knew in advance who would say yes to the offer of the gospel and who would say no. On the basis of this prior knowledge of those who will meet the condition for salvation—that is, expressing faith or belief in Christ—He elects to save them. This is conditional election, which means that God distributes His electing grace on the basis of some foreseen condition that human beings meet themselves.

Unconditional election is another term that I think can be a bit misleading, so I prefer to use the term sovereign election. If God chooses sovereignly to bestow His grace on some sinners and withhold His grace from other sinners, is there any violation of justice in this? Do those who do not receive this gift receive something they do not deserve? Of course not. If God allows these sinners to perish, is He treating them unjustly? Of course not. One group receives grace; the other receives justice. No one receives injustice. Paul anticipates this protest: “Is there injustice on God’s part?” (Romans 9:14a). He answers it with the most emphatic response he can muster. I prefer the translation, “God forbid” (v. 14b). Then he goes on to amplify this response: “For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion’” (v. 15). Here the Apostle is reminding his reader of what Moses declared centuries before; namely, that it is God’s divine right to execute clemency when and where He desires. He says from the beginning, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.” It is not on those who meet some conditions, but on those whom He is pleased to bestow the benefit.

### **LIMITED ATONEMENT**

I think that of all the five points of Calvinism, limited atonement is the most controversial, and the one that engenders perhaps the most confusion and consternation. This doctrine is chiefly concerned about the original purpose, plan, or design of God in sending Christ into the world to die on the cross. Was it the Father’s intent to send His Son to die on the cross to make salvation possible for everyone, but with the possibility that His death would be effective for no one? That is, did God simply send Christ to the cross to make salvation possible, or did God, from all eternity, have a plan of salvation by which, according to the riches of His grace and His eternal election, He designed the atonement to ensure the salvation of His people? Was the atonement limited in its original design?

I prefer not to use the term limited atonement because it is misleading. I rather speak of definite redemption or definite atonement, which communicates that God the Father designed the work of redemption specifically with a view to providing salvation for the elect, and that Christ died for His sheep and laid down His life for those the Father had given to Him.

One of the texts that we often hear used as an objection against the idea of a definite atonement is 2 Peter 3:8–9: “But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” The immediate antecedent of the word any in this passage is the word us, and I think it’s perfectly clear that Peter is saying that God is not willing that any of us should perish, but that all of us should come to salvation. He’s not speaking of all mankind indiscriminately; the us is a reference to the believing people to whom Peter is speaking. I don’t think we want to believe in a God who sends Christ to die on the cross and then crosses His fingers, hoping that someone will take advantage of that atoning death. Our view of God is different. Our

view is that the redemption of specific sinners was an eternal plan of God, and this plan and design was perfectly conceived and perfectly executed so that the will of God to save His people is accomplished by the atoning work of Christ.

This does not mean that a limit is placed on the value or the merit of the atonement of Jesus Christ. It's traditional to say that the atoning work of Christ is sufficient for all. That is, its meritorious value is sufficient to cover the sins of all people, and certainly anyone who puts his or her trust in Jesus Christ will receive the full measure of the benefits of that atonement. It is also important to understand that the gospel is to be preached universally. This is another controversial point, because on the one hand the gospel is offered universally to all who are within earshot of the preaching of it, but it's not universally offered in the sense that it's offered to anyone without any conditions. It's offered to anyone who believes. It's offered to anyone who repents. Obviously, the merit of the atonement of Christ is given to all who believe and to all who repent of their sins.

### **IRRESISTIBLE GRACE**

In historic Reformation thought, the notion is this: regeneration precedes faith. We also believe that regeneration is monergistic. Now that's a three-dollar word. It means essentially that the divine operation called rebirth or regeneration is the work of God alone. An erg is a unit of labor, a unit of work. The word energy comes from that idea. The prefix mono- means "one." So monergism means "one working." It means that the work of regeneration in the human heart is something that God does by His power alone—not by 50 percent His power and 50 percent man's power, or even 99 percent His power and 1 percent man's power. It is 100 percent the work of God. He, and He alone, has the power to change the disposition of the soul and the human heart to bring us to faith.

In addition, when He exercises this grace in the soul, He brings about the effect that He intends to bring about. When God created you, He brought you into existence. You didn't help Him. It was His sovereign work that brought you to life biologically. Likewise, it is His work, and His alone, that brings you into the state of rebirth and of renewed creation. Hence, we call this irresistible grace. It's grace that works. It's grace that brings about what God wants it to bring about. If, indeed, we are dead in sins and trespasses, if, indeed, our wills are held captive by the lusts of our flesh and we need to be liberated from our flesh in order to be saved, then in the final analysis, salvation must be something that God does in us and for us, not something that we in any way do for ourselves.

However, the idea of irresistibility conjures up the idea that one cannot possibly offer any resistance to the grace of God. However, the history of the human race is the history of relentless resistance to the sweetness of the grace of God. Irresistible grace does not mean that God's grace is incapable of being resisted. Indeed, we are capable of resisting God's grace, and we do resist it. The idea is that God's grace is so powerful that it has the capacity to overcome our natural resistance to

it. It is not that the Holy Spirit drags people kicking and screaming to Christ against their wills. The Holy Spirit changes the inclination and disposition of our wills, so that whereas we were previously unwilling to embrace Christ, now we are willing, and more than willing. Indeed, we aren't dragged to Christ, we run to Christ, and we embrace Him joyfully because the Spirit has changed our hearts. They are no longer hearts of stone that are impervious to the commands of God and to the invitations of the gospel. God melts the hardness of our hearts when He makes us new creatures. The Holy Spirit resurrects us from spiritual death, so that we come to Christ because we want to come to Christ. The reason we want to come to Christ is because God has already done a work of grace in our souls. Without that work, we would never have any desire to come to Christ. That's why we say that regeneration precedes faith.

I have a little bit of a problem using the term irresistible grace, not because I don't believe this classical doctrine, but because it is misleading to many people. Therefore, I prefer the term effectual grace, because the irresistible grace of God effects what God intends it to affect.

### **PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS**

Writing to the Philippians, Paul says, "He who has begun a good work in you will perfect it to the end" (Phil. 1:6). Therein is the promise of God that what He starts in our souls, He intends to finish. So the old axiom in Reformed theology about the perseverance of the saints is this: If you have it—that is, if you have genuine faith and are in a state of saving grace—you will never lose it. If you lose it, you never had it.

We know that many people make professions of faith, then turn away and repudiate or recant those professions. The Apostle John notes that there were those who left the company of the disciples, and he says of them, "Those who went out from us were never really with us" (1 John 2:19). Of course, they were with the disciples in terms of outward appearances before they departed. They had made an outward profession of faith, and Jesus makes it clear that it is possible for a person to do this even when he doesn't possess what he's professing. Jesus says, "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" (Matthew 15:8). Jesus even warns at the end of the Sermon on the Mount that at the last day, many will come to Him, saying: "Lord, Lord, didn't we do this in your name? Didn't we do that in your name?" He will send them away, saying: "Depart from Me, you workers of iniquity. I never knew you" (Matthew 7:23). He will not say: "I knew you for a season and then you went sour and betrayed Me. No, you never were part of My invisible church." The whole purpose of God's election is to bring His people safely to heaven; therefore, what He starts He promises to finish. He not only initiates the Christian life, but the Holy Spirit is with us as the sanctifier, the convictor, and the helper to ensure our preservation.

I want to stress that this endurance in the faith does not rest on our strength. Even after we're regenerated, we still lapse into sin, even serious sin. We say that it is possible for a Christian to experience a very serious fall, we talk about backsliding, we talk about moral lapses, and so on. I

can't think of any sin, other than blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, that a truly converted Christian is not capable of committing.

We look, for example, at the model of David in the Old Testament. David was surely a man after God's own heart. He was certainly a regenerate man. He had the Spirit of God in Him. He had a profound and passionate love for the things of God. Yet this man not only committed adultery but also was involved in a conspiracy to have his lover's husband killed in war—which was really conspiracy to murder. That's serious business. Even though we see the serious level of repentance to which David was brought as a result of the words of the prophet Nathan to him, the point is that David fell, and he fell seriously.

The apostle Paul warns us against having a puffed-up view of our own spiritual strength. He says, "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). We do fall into very serious activities. The Apostle Peter, even after being forewarned, rejected Christ, swearing that he never knew Him—a public betrayal of Jesus. He committed treason against His Lord. When he was being warned of this eventuality, Peter said it would never happen. Jesus said, "Simon, Simon, Satan would have you and sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you, so that when you turn, strengthen the brothers" (Luke 22:31). Peter fell, but he returned. He was restored. His fall was for a season. That's why we say that true Christians can have radical and serious falls but never total and final falls from grace.

I think this little catchphrase, perseverance of the saints, is dangerously misleading. It suggests that the perseverance is something that we do, perhaps in and of ourselves. I believe that saints do persevere in faith, and that those who have been effectually called by God and have been reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit endure to the end. However, they persevere not because they are so diligent in making use of the mercies of God. The only reason we can give why any of us continue on in the faith is because we have been preserved. So, I prefer the term the preservation of the saints, because the process by which we are kept in a state of grace is something that is accomplished by God. My confidence in my preservation is not in my ability to persevere. My confidence rests in the power of Christ to sustain me with His grace and by the power of His intercession. He is going to bring us safely home.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/tulip-and-reformed-theology-total-depravity/>

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