

counsel of the Canons which urge that "with respect to those who outwardly profess their faith and amend their lives, we are bound...to judge and speak of them in the most favorable manner; for the secret recesses of the heart are unknown to us" (CoD 3-4.15). Labeling others as unregenerate might betray an unbiblical understanding of grace.

*Grace Promotes Humility*

No one is more worthy to receive God's grace than others. God, in his vast wisdom, does not communicate his gospel or saving grace to everyone (Ps. 147:19,20; Acts 16:6,7). God graciously blesses whom he chooses out of his own good pleasure, not based on any personal merits of the recipient (CoD 3-4.7).

Therefore, we must "in no wise to conduct ourselves towards (unbelievers) with haughtiness, as if we had made ourselves to differ" (CoD 3-4.15). Nor may we "curiously pry into the severity and justice of God's judgments displayed in others to whom (sovereign) grace is not given" (CoD 3-4.7). Instead, it is our duty to pray for unbelievers to God, "who calls the things that are not as if they were" (Rom. 4:17; CoD 3-4.15).

Irresistible grace is part of that golden chain of salvation described in Romans 8 that cannot be broken. God "has chosen his own from eternity in Christ, so He calls them effectually in time, confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of His own Son; that they may show forth the praises of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light..." (CoD 3-4.10).

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# PROCLAMATION

Promoting robust, religious thought in the tradition of orthodox, historic, Christianity  
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## THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM (5)



BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

The first four articles in this series on the Canons of Dort (CoD; popularly known as the Five Points of Calvinism) focused on the historical context, and the first three heads of doctrine (unconditional election, limited atonement, and total depravity, respectively).

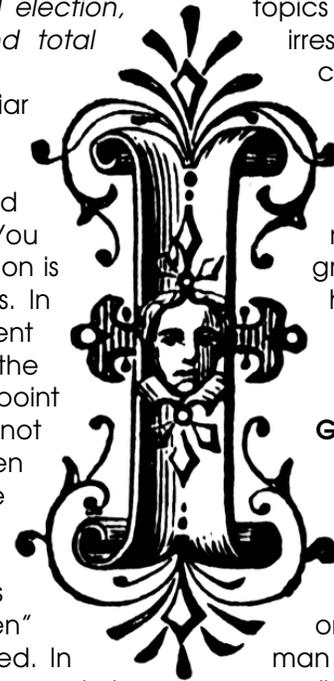
One of the peculiar privileges granted to the president is the right to pardon a limited number of convicts. You might say that this pardon is achieved in two stages. In the first, the president determines to grant the pardon. At this point forgiveness is sure but not experienced. But when the warden calls the prisoner from his cell, and escorts him through the front gates of the jail, the "chosen" prisoner is truly pardoned. In a similar way elect sinners truly experience divine forgiveness when God's irresistible grace releases them from the prison of sin and guilt.

Presidential pardons are sometimes scandalous, but divine

pardons always are. Those whom God visits with grace are duly convicted rebels who always revolt against the kindness of their sovereign. It's no wonder that the topics of total depravity and irresistible grace are combined into one discussion in the Canons of Dort. Totally depraved sinners need a grace that they cannot resist. If God's saving grace was resistible we, like hardened and determined criminals, would always resist it.

**Grace and Man's Natural Inability**

The Canons' explanation of grace in the context of depravity can be summarized positively in one sentence: Because man is by nature unable to reconcile himself to God, God's salvation must be a sovereign regeneration or recreation. From multiple angles, the Bible stresses that fallen man is unable to secure grace by his own efforts



### *Natural Light Cannot Save*

Fallen man is able to know general things about God through creation and his own natural faculties. But this natural light is insufficient to bring him into a saving relationship with God.

Often, when people say they believe in God, they are simply affirming that God exists. But Paul denies that such an affirmation is saving faith; it is simply grasping what the light of nature loudly declares. Such knowledge, if not combined with saving trust in Jesus, doesn't save; it actually condemns man and leaves him without excuse for his unbelief (Rom. 1:18-20). Man can not so improve the natural light so as to secure saving grace (R.E. 5).

### *Personal Obedience Cannot Save*

After the fall, man can no longer use the law to enter into or maintain a right relationship to God (Rom. 8:1-7). Those who assume that they are right with God because of the good things they do fail to recognize God's perfectly righteous standard. A single sin barred Adam from the Garden. A single sin sufficiently bars each of us from heaven.

Man is like a criminal who cannot pardon himself; he needs outside intervention. Being spiritually dead (Eph. 2:5), sinners simply lack the energy and enthusiasm to be recreated. What man is not able to do either through the light of nature or the law, God does through the power of his Holy Spirit (CoD 3-4.6).

### **Grace and Regeneration**

The Pharisees of Jesus' day, like many in our day, tended to miss man's need for a radical recreation. Most peoples suppose that God approves of those who work hard.

### *A Powerful Image*

To the Pharisees bewilderment, Jesus paints a powerful image to explain how a person enters God's kingdom: "You must be born again" (or *re-generated*; John 3:1-8).

Those who are dead in trespasses and sins must be spiritually resurrected or recreated. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature..." (2 Cor. 5:17). In the work of creation and resurrection God receives help from no one. None of us chose to be born. Likewise, John children of God are born, "not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). Similarly, no one chooses to be resurrected. Lazarus could not resist the voice of Christ when he called him from the tomb (John 11:43,44).

### *A Powerful Reality*

God's irresistible grace, or the Holy Spirit's sovereign work in applying to undeserving sinners the perfect merits of Christ, is a rebirth. To no surprise, regeneration brings about real changes in God's children.

First, regeneration is a replacing of man's stony heart with a heart supple to the things of God (Ez. 36:26). God "opens the closed and softens the hardened hearts..." (CoD 3-4.11), enabling believers to love him and obey him affectionately.

Second, regeneration is a radical quickening of the will (CoD 3-4.16). The grace whereby we are converted to God is not a gentle advising. God's power in salvation is not in encouraging men to believe him over Satan because he offers better promises than Satan (R.E. 7). Regeneration, instead, is a total reconstruction of the seat of our desires. Prior to God's work of grace,

man's will is "disobedient and (stubborn); He makes it good, obedient, and pliable. He motivates it and strengthens it so it might bear the fruits of good actions" (CoD 3-4.11). In regeneration, God inclines the will in favor of the things of God.

Third, regeneration is a powerful illumination of the mind. In the rebirth, God shines the light of the Holy Spirit upon the minds of his elect "that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God." (1 Cor. 2:9-16). Amazingly, the believer is given the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16).

It should be clear that regeneration is not the collaborative result of God's grace and man's will (Rom. 9:16; 1 Cor. 4:7; Phil. 2:13; R.E. 9). In regeneration God actually revives a sinner. He savingly applies the benefits of Christ's death to spiritually lifeless people.

### *A Power Unparalleled*

It should go with out saying that when God determines to regenerate a person his efforts cannot be overcome (Eph. 1:19; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2 Pet. 1:3; R.E. 8). When God converts his elect he not only communicates the gospel to them but also regenerates them by his sovereign power (CoD 3-4.11).

At the same time, when God works savingly, those he is saving actually come to life and do repent and believe (Art. 12). Faith is a new quality, power, and gift infused into the will by God (Jer. 31:33; Is. 44:3; Rom. 5:5; Jer. 31:18; R.E. 6). Salvation is a gift, not because God offers and man accepts it, but because God produces both the will to and act of believing (Art. 14; Eph. 2:8).

### **Grace and Practical Godliness**

Irresistible grace is not technical, theological shop-talk. Instead, the doctrine powerfully shapes how we think and act.

### *Grace is Seriously Offered to Sinners*

Some have accused God's call to repent and believe of being deceitful to some since he does not spiritually resurrect all people. But God sincerely promises that no one who comes to Christ will be cast out (John 6:37; CoD 3-4.8). Those who perish, having rejected the gospel call, have only themselves to blame (Matt. 13; CoD 3-4.9).

### *Graces Comes through Means*

God works his regenerating grace in depraved sinners apart from their cooperation. But God does not work in them apart from means (CoD 3-4.17). God's Spirit ordinarily moves the hearts of sinners through the means of gospel preaching, administration of the sacraments, and church discipline.

### *Grace Produces Gratitude*

Those who are saved cannot credit their own free will but the effectual will of God (CoD 3-4.10). Believers rejoice in this regeneration even if they don't entirely comprehend it (CoD 3-4.13). Everyone "who becomes the subject of (God's) grace owes eternal gratitude to God" (CoD 3-4.15).

### *Grace Obliges Charitable Judgment*

The essence of a believer is not impeccable doctrine or an immaculate lifestyle but the gracious application of the blood of Jesus on the heads of unworthy sinners. When we truly believe this we will follow the