

Reformed Perspective

Summer, 2019

The Reformed Perspective is a publication devoted to explaining the Reformed doctrine, promoting the Reformed life of the Church and believer, and combating old and new errors that threaten to disrupt the Reformed faith and life. This publication is produced by the Evangelism Committee of Crete Protestant Reformed Church of Illinois. Visit us at www.prccrete.org for more information.

SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICES: 9:30 A.M and 5:00 P.M.
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This article treats the Reformed understanding of grace. It is the next in a series of articles that explains the Calvinistic acronym, TULIP. The letters of the acronym stand for Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Preservation of the saints. These brief phrases intend to summarize the important points of the biblical confession that God's salvation of sinners is wholly his work and not at all the work of the sinner. This series has already examined the confession of Total depravity, Unconditional election, and Limited atonement.¹

The phrase represented by I in TULIP expresses the basic truth of the gospel that the sinner's salvation is by irresistible grace. The gospel teaches that God saves the sinner by grace. The Bible declares in Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." Grace is the power of God for the sinner's salvation. The grace that saves the sinner is irresistible grace.

The truth of irresistible grace cannot be separated from the biblical truth of the sovereignty of God's will for the salvation of sinners. According to his eternal good pleasure God sovereignly determines the eternal destinies of all human beings. God does this apart from a consideration of the sinner's worthiness or unworthiness. He does not appoint some to salvation because they are more worthy. He does not appoint others to damnation because of their sins. It is an independent choice of God taken according to his own good pleasure. God graciously appoints sinners to salvation from eternity and that in distinction to those whom he eternally reprobates. God carries out his eternal will for the salvation of sinners appointed to salvation by grace. Basic, then, to understanding that grace is irresistible is the understanding that God does not desire the salvation of every human being, but desires the salvation of his elect people only. God accomplishes his saving good pleasure in his elect by his grace. God's will for the salvation of sinners appointed to eternal life he infallibly accomplishes because the grace by which God saves is irresistible.

That confession that grace is irresistible stands over against the false doctrine that the grace of God is resistible. The concept of resistible grace is basic to every corruption of the truth of God's gracious salvation of sinners.

Roman Catholicism teaches that the salvation of sinners is the result of two things: the grace of God and the will of the sinner cooperating with the grace of God by the sinner's free will. Yet many sinners to

¹ Previous articles in this series can be downloaded at prccrete.org/resources/reformed-perspectives.

whom God's grace is offered and who in fact partake of that grace in Rome's sacraments resist that grace and perish.

Arminianism likewise corrupts the truth of irresistible grace. Arminianism was the heresy condemned by the Synod Dordrecht that met in 1618-1619 in the Netherlands and whose 400th anniversary is celebrated this year. Arminianism was the work of the heretical Reformed minister Jacob Arminius who taught that salvation is the result of the sinner's choice of Jesus Christ who is offered to all in the preaching of the gospel. He had a particular loathing for the doctrine of predestination. He spread this far and wide among his students and followers. Arminianism was eventually condemned at the Synod of Dordrecht and that condemnation was set down in the Reformed creed, the Canons of Dordrecht. Arminianism flourishes yet today among modern evangelicals who, though they do not use the term Arminianism, yet maintain the doctrine by teaching that God has a universal love for all human beings, that God desires the salvation of all human beings, and that God graciously offers salvation to all human beings. However, that grace of God taught by Arminians past and present, can be and is resisted by human beings who in turn perish for their refusal to accept God's offered salvation.

The same basic false idea about grace is found in the popular but false doctrine commonly called the well-meant gospel offer. The teaching of this false doctrine is that God in the preaching of the gospel expresses a serious and well-meant offer that everyone who hears the gospel of Jesus Christ be saved. In that offer there is the extension of grace and salvation in Christ to all who hear. However, men resist the grace of God offered in the preaching, frustrate his will that all be saved, and perish for their rejection of that offered grace.

The same error is basic to the false doctrine of a conditional covenant. The false doctrine of the conditional covenant takes many forms, yet all have in common the idea of grace extended to every single baptized child. The false doctrine of the conditional covenant in recent times has culminated in the development of the heresy of the federal vision. The federal vision is a movement that has infiltrated nearly every Reformed and Presbyterian denomination in the world today. The word federal in its name means covenant and refers to the covenant of grace. The proponents of this heresy teach that every single baptized child is incorporated by baptism into Jesus Christ and made a member of the covenant of grace. The blessedness and continuation of those children in the covenant, however, is dependent on their faith and faithfulness as a condition. In the conditional covenant all baptized children receive grace from Christ, yet that grace is not able to save all to whom it is given, but many perish who have received the grace of Christ because they do not fulfill the condition of the covenant to trust and obey. Thus they resist the grace of God that was given to them and perish, and the grace of God given to them is a failure.

These teachings about salvation that maintain that God's grace is resistible are the inevitable result of the teaching that God desires the salvation of all human beings. These teachings about grace being resistible are also invariably accompanied with the idea that God offers salvation, grace, and blessedness to men. Desiring the salvation of all, he offers salvation and grace to all. But that grace to all is a grace that is resistible by man. Not only is it resisted, but resisted effectually by man so that because of man's will and resistance God is not able to accomplish his saving good pleasure in those whom he desires to save.

The teaching that God's grace is resistible stands in the service of teaching that salvation is by man's works. Salvation by man's works, no matter how little, is the antithesis of salvation by grace. It is this antithesis that the Scriptures reveal in Romans 11:6, "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work." Salvation, in the context of this verse, the salvation and preservation of an elect remnant in Israel, is by grace and not by works. If the salvation of a sinner, however so little, is attributed to the sinner's works, then his salvation is all of works and not of grace at all. Grace in that case is simply used as window dressing. The real work that saves is what man does. But if man's salvation is all of grace, then it is not at all dependent on the sinner's works. Whatever man does, then, is the fruit and effect of grace and salvation.

So the Calvinistic, Reformed confession about salvation trumpets over against every corruption of that doctrine that salvation is by irresistible grace.

Grace is God's perfection. God is gracious himself and without respect to sinners or the whole matter of the salvation of those sinners. In himself and eternally he is gracious. The perfection of God's grace is his beauty and loveliness as the perfect and perfectly good and holy God. So grace is essentially beauty. The confession that God is the God of all grace without respect to sinners is important for two reasons. First, it establishes that God is not dependent on the sinner to be able to show that he is gracious. Second, it establishes that grace is a perfection of God so that whatever one says about grace he says about God. If grace is resistible, then God is resistible. Because resistible grace fails and is frustrated by man, then God fails and is frustrated by man. Then he is no longer the God who sits in the heaven and does all his good pleasure and the God who brings to pass all his counsel and will. This really is the only argument that is needed to establish that grace is irresistible. Grace is the perfection of God. Grace is as irresistible as God himself. As little as man can resist God himself can he also resist grace, and as little as man can frustrate God himself can he also frustrate the will of God accomplished by grace.

The grace of God when directed toward and revealed to sinners is both an attitude of favor toward those sinners in which God desires their everlasting good and blessedness and the power of God to accomplish the salvation of those sinners.

Grace is the undeserved favor of God toward his elect people. Those upon whom God has grace are those that by nature are his enemies, who hate him, and who would destroy him. As Romans 5:10 says, "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." God showed his grace to his enemies. Those enemies are elect human beings that he appointed to salvation. All men, including all of God's elect, became the enemies of God in the fall of Adam into sin in the Garden of Eden. What illustrates and magnifies the grace of God in salvation is that he showed that grace to his enemies and thus to those who had no claim to that grace. So God had favor toward his enemies and desired their salvation.

Grace is the power of God to save and to bless his elect people with salvation that consists in covenant fellowship with God. God does not ineffectually wish for the salvation of his people, but he infallibly accomplishes that salvation by the power of grace. So grace is the power of God to do the impossible, as the angel explained to Mary concerning the incarnation of Jesus Christ, "For with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37). What is impossible for man, namely to save himself, God accomplishes by the power of grace through the incarnation, death, resurrection, and Spirit of Jesus Christ. By his grace God overcomes the natural resistance of his people to grace. Being his enemies by nature they hate him. However, this is no barrier to God. He lays hold of them by his grace, changes them, saves them, and makes them love him.

The Reformed faith confesses about the truth of grace that the grace that saves is irresistible. The work of salvation that God determined to perform in his elect people he infallibly and irresistibly performs against all the ineffectual opposition of man, Satan, his demons, and the ungodly world. The elect sinner himself cannot resist the grace of God and frustrate his purpose to save the sinner and neither is there any power in the world that can hinder, frustrate, or annul God's purpose and work of salvation.

God's grace is not directed toward all men, but toward his elect and them only. So the Scriptures say about the saving works of God's grace that they proceed from election in Romans 8:30, "Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified."

The Reformed faith knows one and only one kind of grace. That is saving grace. There is no such thing as common grace, which is one of the long-standing corruptions of grace introduced by Reformed minister Abraham Kuyper. Common grace is nigh on universally confessed by Reformed churches today. It was the adoption of that false doctrine by the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 that led to the expulsion

of the fathers of the Protestant Reformed Churches from that denomination for their objection to and insistence that common grace is neither biblical nor Reformed. Common grace teaches that God has a universal and non-saving grace toward all humans especially as that is expressed in the well-meant gospel offer and shown in giving rain and sunshine and other good gifts of this non-saving grace to all human beings. Further, common grace teaches that there is a gracious, but non-saving, restraint of sin in the heart of the unregenerated that enables them to do civil and ceremonial good pleasing to God. All other objections to common grace aside, the very resistibility of this grace is its condemnation. The fact, admitted by its supporters and promoters, is that common grace is by its very nature resistible and does not issue in the salvation of those to whom it is given. Besides, if one takes the grand promises of common grace for the redemption of culture and a Christian society as the standard of its success, then common grace has been a dismal failure for such a society has failed to materialize, evidently because men have successfully resisted this common grace of God.

The Bible speaks about God's attitude toward the ungodly, especially as those ungodly are the recipients of God's good gifts in creation and as they prosper in the world. Those good gifts of God are not grace from God, but rather instruments whereby God carries out his will for the eternal destruction of the ungodly. So Psalm 73:18 says about God's good gifts toward the ungodly and their consequent success in the world, "Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction."

That salvation is by grace does not subvert the use of means. In the salvation of the sinner it pleases God to use means. These are called in Reformed doctrine the means of grace. The means of grace are the preaching of the pure gospel of Jesus Christ and the proper administration of the sacraments. These means are used by God to apply to his elect people the salvation to which God appointed them and which he accomplished at the cross of Christ. God does not use these means to regenerate the elect, to bring them to heaven at death, or to raise their bodies at the end of time. In this sense there are aspects of the salvation of the elect child of God that are without means. Yet to call his people to repentance and faith, to work faith in their hearts, to justify, and to sanctify them, he uses the means of grace. These means are used by the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ to apply salvation to God's people graciously.

That salvation is by grace does not either imply that God takes his people to heaven as though they were a block of wood. Grace operates in them to give them the will to believe and the act of believing also. By that faith they receive their salvation. Yet in whatever activity the child of God engages is the work of God, the fruit of grace, and can never be the activity on which salvation depends. Rather, it is a gift of God to the believer as part and parcel of his salvation of his children by grace.

That salvation is by grace alone is the only doctrine that gives glory to God alone because it ascribes the salvation of the sinner to God alone. As God says about his salvation of sinners by grace, "That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:31).

