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**The Fourth Heading:
“Both Delightful and Powerful”
*The Doctrine of Irresistible Grace in the Canons of Dort***

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*Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles!
Laud Him, all you peoples!
For His merciful kindness is great toward us,
And the truth of the LORD endures forever.*

Praise the LORD!

Psalm 117

Introduction

Psalm 117 is curiously short, but what it lacks in length, it makes up for in depth. Sitting juxtaposed to Psalm 119, which uses its sheer mass to emphasize the power and purity of God’s Word, it makes a fascinating contrast. This tiny Psalm uses its brevity to isolate and accentuate its single most important teaching. When sung, it is a Psalm that keeps us singing for just a moment, then leaves us in silence to ponder the central truth it most emphasizes. That truth is the doctrine of Irresistible Grace. The first verse is a call to worship and the second verse simply gives us a reason to praise the Lord: “His merciful kindness is great toward us” (NKJV). The Hebrew verb in this sentence is *gābar*, which means “to prevail over,” or “be mighty.” It is used to describe the floodwaters “prevailing” over the earth in Genesis 7, and it is used to describe a stronger army “prevailing” over its enemy in 2 Samuel 11. This is a verb that describes one thing overwhelming another. In Psalm 117, the thing that overwhelms and prevails is the “merciful kindness” of God, or *hesed* in Hebrew, which denotes the unmerited grace of God toward His people. The object that is overwhelmed is – us. This verse may be translated as: “For His grace overwhelms us, and the truth of the Lord endures forever.” Psalm 117 pictures the grace of our God as an irresistible force that subdues His people and effectually redeems us. One does not find a more succinct and powerful statement of the doctrine of irresistible grace in all of Scripture, but one does not have to look far to see this truth reiterated again and again in God’s Word.

But while God’s grace is irresistible, the doctrine of irresistible grace has often been resisted throughout the centuries, forcing the church to articulate and defend this Biblical truth. One of

the most important, orthodox affirmations of this Biblical truth comes to us from the early seventeenth century in the Canons of Dort.

The Remonstrants on Grace

The Synod of Dort gathered to refute a false teaching that has its deepest root in the fifth century heresy of Pelagianism, the basic tenets of which are the intrinsic goodness of man and the inherent human ability to choose what is good and live righteously apart from the influence of sovereign grace. In other words, Pelagius taught that all men are born spiritually healthy. This heresy was successfully refuted by Augustine, but it gave way to the compromising heresy of Semi-Pelagianism, which is still entrenched in the Roman Catholic Church today, and which teaches, essentially, that man is not healthy but sick, and only needs to cooperate with the redeeming efforts of God. This pedigree of doctrine is in obvious and direct opposition to the teaching of Scripture, which plainly declares that the descendants of Adam are not born spiritually healthy or spiritually sick, but spiritually dead, and entirely dependent upon the sovereign grace of God through Christ. But old heresies die hard, and by the time of the sixteenth century, there was, as always, nothing new under the sun. Jacob Arminius gave this doctrinal lineage a new make-over, particularly by challenging the doctrines of total depravity and predestination in his preaching, and later in his teaching at Leiden University from 1602-1609. Arminius was well enough connected, and evasive enough in his words to avoid a church censure, so his following grew. By the time Arminius died in 1609, his adherents were numerous enough to pose a real threat to the peace and orthodoxy of the Reformed churches. The year after his death, the followers of Arminius codified their beliefs in a document called the Remonstrance, in which they articulated five articles of doctrine, which still define Arminianism today. Article 4 of the Remonstrance explicitly denies Irresistible Grace with these words:

This grace is the beginning, the increase, and completion of every good thing; to be sure even that the regenerate person himself is not even able to think, will, or accomplish good, nor resist any temptation to evil apart from or preceding that prevenient, moving, accompanying, and cooperating grace, so that all good works and actions which are able to be conceived must be ascribed to the grace of God in Christ. As for the rest, what pertains to the manner of operation of this grace – that it is not irresistible, since indeed it is written about many that “they resisted the Holy Spirit”, Acts 7:51 and several other places.¹

Here the Remonstrants declare that God’s grace is necessary, but they refer to it as assisting and “cooperative,” meaning that salvation is a synergistic effort between the will of God and the will of man. From this false premise follows the inevitable error that God’s grace “is not irresistible.” Succinctly put, the Arminian doctrine is that God initiates grace, which is not effectual, but man can effectually resist that grace if he so chooses. Oddly enough, this makes man’s will irresistible instead of God’s.

The Remonstrants note the language of Scripture that talks about men resisting the Holy Spirit, particularly in Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7, where Stephen said to the Pharisees, “You always resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did.” Their interpretation of this language, however, rests upon a string of false assumptions. The Arminians denied the distinction between the secret will and the revealed will of God; hence, they made no distinction between the external call of the gospel to all men and the effectual internal call of the gospel to the elect.² The failure to make this distinction ultimately goes back to the Arminian denial of the doctrines of total depravity,

¹ James T. Dennison Jr., ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 4:43.

² Matthew Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness: An Introduction to Doctrine and Piety in the Canons of Dort* (Kitchener, Ontario: Joshua Press, 2013), 80.

unconditional election, and limited atonement. To the Arminian, every instance of a hardened sinner refusing the gospel proves that God's grace is resistible. However, no Calvinist ever denied that totally depraved sinners resist the gospel and the grace of God offered in it. This resistance is in their very nature, and without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, the external call of the gospel will be rejected. The Biblical point we affirm, and which we will see unfolded in the Canons of Dort, is that all who are chosen by God, and effectually called by the gospel, are drawn to Christ by irresistible grace. The Pharisees in Acts 7 do not fit in this category; their rejection of the gospel only reveals the hardness of their hearts, not the resistibility of God's grace. One only needs to compare Acts 7 to Acts 16, where we are told that the Lord opened the heart of Lydia to receive and believe the gospel, which is a beautiful account of God's irresistible grace toward a woman whom He chose to save from all eternity. What makes God's grace irresistible is His sovereign intention to save, which He had toward Lydia in Acts 16, but not toward the Pharisees in Acts 7. The Pharisees' rejection of the gospel, and Lydia's acceptance of it, is explained by the sovereignty of God in salvation, not the resistibility of His saving grace.

Dordt's Response on Grace

It is obvious from the foregoing discussion that the doctrine of human nature is intertwined with the question of the resistibility of God's grace. If all men are able to choose the good, then God's grace needs only to meet them halfway, and it may be accepted or resisted on the basis of man's ability to choose. If, however, man is spiritually dead and totally depraved, God's grace to the elect must be sovereign and irresistible. This inherent connection between the doctrine of human nature and the nature of saving grace is no doubt why the Synod of Dort combined these two heads of doctrine when it met to respond to the Arminian controversy in 1618-19. The Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, combined in one section of the Canons of Dort, seamlessly articulate the interconnected doctrines of total depravity and irresistible grace. Irresistible grace is not in itself a singular act of God in the *ordo salutis*, like regeneration or conversion, but rather it is a way of describing the sovereignty and compelling power of God's grace at all points in the divine work of salvation. Therefore, there is not a single article in the Canons devoted solely to irresistible grace. Instead, the Canons infuse the language of sovereignty and irresistibility throughout its articles dealing with effectual calling, conversion, and regeneration.

After a robust and Biblical definition of total depravity,³ Article 10 begins to unfold the sovereign and irresistible nature of God's grace toward His people, beginning with eternal election and effectual calling. Article 10 reads:

But that others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will, whereby one distinguishes himself above others equally furnished with grace sufficient for faith and conversion (as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains); but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who, as He 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, and may glory not in themselves but in the Lord, according to the testimony of the apostles in various places.⁴

³ "Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, or to dispose themselves to reformation." Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 135.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

This article affirms that when anyone embraces Christ in faith, their saving response to the gospel has its roots in the eternal election of God. This is evident from Scripture in places like Romans 8:29-30, where the golden chain of salvation begins with eternal election, and Acts 13:48, where we are told that upon hearing the gospel preached by Paul and Barnabas “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” This article goes on to say how the elect are *effectually* called in time, which is to say that the hearts of the elect are inevitably and invariably opened by the Holy Spirit to receive the grace of the gospel. Paul said in Romans 1:14 that the gospel is the *power* of God unto salvation for all who believe, and the Lord has declared in Isaiah 55:11 that His Word will not return to Him void, but it will accomplish what He pleases. The power of God through His Word to affect the conversion of man is rooted in eternal election and spoken of frequently in Scripture. This language of divine power is reflected in this Article of the Canons, which is sprinkled throughout with language that gives all credit and glory to God in the work of salvation from beginning to end.

Moving on from eternal election and effectual calling, the next article takes up the subjects of regeneration and conversion. Article 11 reads:

But when God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect or works in them true conversion, He not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them and powerfully illuminates their mind by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God; but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit, pervades the inmost recesses of the man; He opens the closed, and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised, infuses new qualities into the will, which though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient, and refractory, He renders it good, obedient, and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions.⁵

This article magnificently speaks of the illumination of the mind, and the penetration of the inmost man by the Holy Spirit, resulting in new life. The language here in the Canons comes from both Old and New Testament metaphors that describe the new nature of the regenerate – their hearts are opened (as in Acts 16:14), softened (as in Ezek. 36:26-27), and circumcised (as in Deut. 30:6). Like Article 10, Article 11 also uses that now-familiar key word – “effectual” or “efficacy” to describe this sovereign work of God. There is nothing resistible about it.

Some discussion has arisen over the meaning of the phrase, “He infuses new qualities into the will,” as if some new ontological properties are possessed by the believer that the unregenerate do not have.⁶ However, it is clear from the language of this article that the “new qualities” of the will in view are not ontological but moral – they consist of the qualities of willingness to believe, compliance to God’s work, and the desire to produce the fruit of obedience. These are God-given qualities of a will that is renewed by the Lord. In contrast, the Arminians taught that God in no way tampers with or changes the will of man, and the only thing that can be called a gift of God is the innate ability of man to choose salvation. Specifically, the Arminians taught:

[T]hat in the true conversion of man no new qualities, powers or gifts can be infused by God into the will, and that therefore faith through which we are first converted, and because of which we are called believers, is not a quality or gift infused by God, but only an act of man, and that it cannot be said to be a gift, except in respect of the power to attain to this faith.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See the discussion by Robert Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2019), 137-8.

⁷ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 142.

In the face of such teaching, Article 11 is a beautiful and Biblical affirmation of the sovereign work of God in renewing our minds, softening our hearts, and enlivening our wills when we are effectually called and converted. It is then that the great doctrine of irresistible grace becomes experiential and unmistakable to the believer. Psalm 51, for example, speaks to the believer's consciousness that his heart is recreated from above, and his mind is made willing toward new obedience, not by his own efforts. Scripture plainly teaches that a fallen sinner's heart can only be changed from outside himself, irresistibly. He cannot will to change, much less change himself in this respect, any more than a leopard can change his spots (Jer. 13:23). It is the Lord who says of His people, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26). To credit man himself with the changing of his own heart is an almost inconceivable contradiction to Scripture. John 1:13 plainly says that believers are born, not of the will of man, but of the will of God. Rebirth itself is a metaphor that depends on the reality of irresistible grace because a baby can no more resist being born than a believer can resist being born again.

Article 12 in this section, which focuses on the sovereignty of God in regeneration, is undoubtedly, the crescendo of the Synod's affirmation of irresistible grace. It reads:

And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in Scripture and denominated a new creation: a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid. But this is in no wise effected merely by the external preaching of the gospel, by moral suasion, or such a mode of operation, that after God has performed His part, it still remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not, to be converted or to continue unconverted; but it is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection from the dead, as the Scripture inspired by the author of this work declares; so that all in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated, and do actually believe. Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence, becomes itself active. Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent, by virtue of that grace received.⁸

This glorious statement, which is as much a doxology as a doctrinal assertion, begins by giving all glory to God, who "works in us without our help." This is the essence of *monergism*, which is a compound word combining *mono*, meaning "one," and *ergon*, meaning "work." There is one Worker in our salvation, who alone works within our hearts to bring about new life. It can thus be rightly said that God works within us and without us – that is, within our hearts, and without our help.⁹

This article goes on to say that mere outward teaching and moral persuasion are not enough, and that these things by themselves do not leave man in a position to choose for himself. Instead, regeneration is "evidently a supernatural work," which is just as powerful and marvelous as the work of creation, or the raising of the dead. Describing this awesome work of regeneration, the Synod heaped adjectives upon adjectives attempting to describe the indescribable – calling it astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable. The Canons are poetic at this point, calling our regeneration "most powerful, and at the same time, most delightful." It is most powerful because it is sovereign and irresistible. The wording does not say to whom it is "most delightful," but it is obviously so to both God, who delights to save, and His people, whose wills are changed to embrace and rejoice in the peace with God that Christ has accomplished. There is

⁸ Ibid., 138.

⁹ Arthur van Delden, *Lest Any Man Should Boast: The Canons of Dort Simply Explained* (Chatham, Ontario: Bethel Books, 2004), 196.

perhaps no better way to describe God's sovereign, irresistible work of regeneration than "most powerful and most delightful."

In this paragraph, we find the unmistakable affirmation of irresistible grace in these words: "[A]ll in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated, and do actually believe." There is the keyword "effectual" again. The grace of God is effective, which is another way of calling it irresistible, the point being that the truly regenerate never fails to believe. Jesus said in John 6:37, "All that the Father gives to Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me, I will by no means cast out."

This article concludes with the point that the regenerate will is an active will, so that while all the glory of salvation belongs to God, the saved person can rightly be said to believe and repent. This means that the renewed will is first acted upon by God, then in consequence of this renewal becomes active itself.¹⁰ This renewed, willing heart is what makes the people of Christ "volunteer in the Day of His power," as Psalm 110 puts it. Later in Article 14, the Canons teach that God produces both the will to believe and the act of believing also,¹¹ but the point here is that the renewed man can rightly be said to believe. It is not as though God believes for us. By virtue of the work of regeneration, which is entirely the work of God, we do indeed believe.¹² This point of Article 12 is meant to refute the Arminian caricature of irresistible grace as a coercion of unwilling souls into the kingdom of heaven. Article 16 goes on to make this point more explicit, saying,

[S]o also this grace of regeneration does not treat men as senseless stocks and blocks, nor take away their will and its properties, or do violence thereto; but it spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends it, that where carnal rebellion and resistance formerly prevailed, a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign.¹³

So, the Lord does not break, abolish, or remove the will of man; instead, He renews it, and here again, is the beautiful description of God's sovereign work of regeneration being both "delightful and powerful." Here that poetic phrase is employed to make the point that God's grace is not a forceful act of coercion, but an effectual reformation of the will that is delightful to both God and His people.¹⁴

Finally, we note how the Canons consist of not only articles that positively affirm the irresistibility of grace, but paragraphs called "Rejections" that explicitly deny the teaching of the Remonstrants. Under this head of doctrine, Rejection 8 refutes those who teach,

¹⁰ Cornelius Pronk, *Expository Sermons on the Canons of Dort* (Calgary: Free Reformed Publications, 2014), 245.

¹¹ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 138.

¹² Martyn McGeown, *Grace and Assurance: The Message of the Canons of Dort* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2018), 246.

¹³ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 139.

¹⁴ Peter G. Feenstra, *Unspeakable Comfort: A Commentary on the Canons of Dort* (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1997), 132.

[T]hat God in the regeneration of man does not use such powers of His omnipotence as potently and infallibly bend man's will to faith and conversion; but that all the works of grace having been accomplished, which God employs to convert man, man may yet so resist God and the Holy Spirit, when God intends man's regeneration and wills to regenerate him, and indeed that man often does so resist that he prevents entirely his regeneration and that it, therefore, remains in man's power to be regenerated or not.¹⁵

The Arminians affirmed that God is omnipotent but denied that He exercised this power in the work of salvation.¹⁶ The result is a view of salvation in which nothing God does is decisive, which the Synod rejected with a host of Scripture, quoting Ephesians 1:19, “We believe because of the efficacy of the strength of His might;” 2 Thessalonians 1:11, “God powerfully fulfills in us the gracious benevolence of His kindness and the work of faith;” and 2 Peter 1:3, “His divine power has given us all things which pertain to life and piety.” It should be noted that, while the Synod affirmed its doctrine in the midst of controversy, explicitly rejecting false teaching, it maintained a pastoral tone that today still counsels us toward humility before the irresistible grace of God. Article 7 says, “[T]hey to whom so great and so gracious a blessing is communicated above their desert, or rather notwithstanding their demerits, are bound to acknowledge it with humble and grateful hearts.” And Article 15 states, “And as to others, who have not yet been called, it is our duty to pray for them to God, who calls the things that are not, as if they were. But we are in no wise to conduct ourselves towards them with haughtiness as if we had made ourselves to differ.”

In summary, the Synod of Dort taught that the grace of God to His people is an irresistible grace, which results in the certainty of salvation for all of those whom God has purposed to save from eternity. With great care to base every assertion on Scripture, and using the language of Scripture itself throughout, the Canons of Dort have provided a statement of one of Scripture's most beautiful doctrines, and it has withstood the test of time and the challenge of false teaching for four centuries. Throughout its articles, the Canons use the words “effective,” “effectively,” and “efficacious” to describe the work of God in the calling, conversion, and regeneration of His people. The intentional repetition of this key Biblical idea is how the Synod infused the Canons throughout with the affirmation of irresistible grace. Some have even proposed that it might be better to call this doctrine effectual grace rather than irresistible grace. “Effectual” was certainly the preferred word of the Synod of Dort, and it does, perhaps, avoid the suggestion that believers are somehow compelled to enter the kingdom of God.¹⁷ There is good reason, however, for calling it irresistible grace, and not just because it fits in nicely in our TULIP acronym. Irresistible grace is a name for this doctrine that pictures the saving work of God from our perspective, reminding us that, without the sovereign working of the Spirit within us, we would have indeed resisted Christ and His gospel. We are resisters of God by nature, and would have certainly resisted His grace, if He did not make His grace irresistible. So irresistible grace is a doctrine that should always humble us, with the memory of what we were without Christ, and with thankfulness that God's grace is such that it prevails over us, as we are told in Psalm 117.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us return to that Psalm with which we began and show how the language of the Canons magnificently captures and reflects its true meaning when it says that God's grace is “both delightful and powerful.” The Psalm begins, “Praise the LORD all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!” Here is the unmistakable call to voice our joy and delight in the God of our salvation. This delight undergirds our worship, and compels us to worship, because God's work

¹⁵ Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 143.

¹⁶ Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation*, 151.

¹⁷ Cornelius Venema, *But for the Grace of God: An Exposition of the Canons of Dort* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1994), 67, fn. 29.

in Christ toward us is indeed a most delightful thing. Then, as we saw earlier, the Psalm goes on to say, “For His grace prevails over us,” and here we see the power of it. It is effectual and irresistible. It overwhelms us and subdues us. Verse one declares how delightful God’s grace is, and verse two declares the power of it. It is, as the Canons of Dort put it, “both delightful and powerful.”

But we cannot conclude without seeing how this little Psalm is fulfilled by God’s irresistible grace going out through all the earth to save many people from many nations. In this Psalm, we find a curious thing that the Gentiles and nations of the world are called to praise the LORD because His grace prevails over us. The Psalm says, in effect, “You praise the LORD because His grace prevails over us.” The “you” is the nations. The “us” is Israel. In this Psalm, “us” makes room for “you,” and calls Jew and Gentile alike, to praise the one true God. So, this little Psalm anticipates the prevailing grace of God going beyond Israel and to all the nations, and that is exactly how Paul quotes it in Romans 15:11.

And so, we of all people have reason to heed this call to worship. The irresistible grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has gone out to the nations and it has come to us, and it is, to say the least, “both delightful and powerful.” And so, let us be committed, together, to wholeheartedly praise and diligently serve the God whose grace prevails over us.