

Landon - Sharp Debate on the Call to Salvation

David Landon (Reformed Presbyterian Church)

and

Keith Sharp (Church of Christ)

Propositions

The Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit operates directly and supernaturally upon the hearts of elect sinners to regenerate their dead hearts and to irresistibly draw them to Christ.

Affirm: David Landon

Deny: Keith Sharp

The Scriptures teach that the only call to salvation God extends to sinners is through the gospel message and that this gospel message is completely able to bring dead sinners to saving faith.

Affirm: Keith Sharp

Deny: David Landon

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Affirmative

David Landon

Proposition: The Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit operates directly and supernaturally upon the hearts of elect sinners to regenerate their dead hearts and to irresistibly draw them to Christ.

This is the fourth in a series of debates between Keith and myself on Calvinism and related subjects. In many ways this debate on the nature of grace is the most important of all our topics. The doctrine of irresistible grace preserves both the supernatural and monergistic (God alone saves) aspects of salvation. It is for this reason that reformed theologian B.B. Warfield calls this doctrine "the hinge of Calvinistic soteriology." It is important therefore that we understand our terms.

By heart we mean all that comprises an individual's personality including his understanding, will, and affections.

A dead heart is one that is dead towards God. The will and understanding retain all that is in accordance with nature, but are alienated towards God and impotent to perform anything spiritually good or acceptable to God.

By regeneration we mean that sovereign operation of God wherein He renews those who are dead in sins, taking away their heart of stone and giving them a heart of flesh.

The chief controversy in this debate has to do with the words "directly," "supernaturally," and "irresistibly." They require, therefore, a closer look.

By directly we mean the Holy Spirit's work in the heart wherein He works immediately, without the use of means. By saying this we do not deny that the preaching of the gospel is necessary for salvation. But we do say that the *inward call* of the Spirit must accompany the *outward call* of the gospel in order for the gospel message to be effectual.

This inward call of the gospel comes to the elect supernaturally. The effects of this call in the heart are above anything that can be produced by nature. Nature can produce much, especially when assisted by the *common grace* of God. Mankind has been given both reason and a conscience. By reason a man's mind may be filled with many notions and speculations about what he sees or reads. Reading the Bible, he may deduce a great many truths from what he ponders there. His conscience is that natural faculty by which he is able to distinguish between right and wrong, and upon reading the Scriptures he may be the subject of great convictions. The Spirit of God may assist a man in his use of these faculties so that he may progress far in the knowledge of God, and

yet, for all of that, come short of salvation. (See Matt. 13 :20 and Heb.6:4-6). In regeneration the elect are the recipients of the *special grace* of God. They have imparted unto them, as a principle of life, an apprehension of the transcendent excellency of spiritual things. They delight in and are conformed to these things by the effectual operation of the Spirit.

That the Spirit's work is effectual or efficacious in the application of grace to rebel sinners is all we mean by the word **irresistible**. If fallen men were simply left to the use of their free wills in the matter of salvation none would be saved, but in regeneration the Spirit overcomes all resistance. He does this by granting to the understanding of the elect what they could never attain to by the mere improvement of reason or conscience, and that is a spiritual sight and sense of the excellencies of Christ sufficient to overcome all opposition, enabling them to repent of their sins and willingly lay down their arms in submission to Christ.

I have taken greater space for definition because of the misunderstandings and caricatures that abound about this doctrine. We do not teach some that men are dragged to salvation against their wills, or that others who desire salvation are rejected. We do teach:

1. That the effects of grace in the heart are supernaturally wrought and are therefore different in *kind* and not merely in *degree* from all that was in the heart before conversion.
2. The change in the heart from wicked to holy is instantaneous and not merely the result of the improvement of grace or human endeavor.
3. God's work of grace on the heart is sovereign and determinative.
4. It is only by teaching the above that we can consistently say that **God saves** sinners.

The Scriptures clearly teach efficacious grace.

1. The new birth is **of God**. John 3:3-8; 1:12,13. Verse 13 clearly rules out human endeavor; our spiritual birth is not of the will of man or of the will of the flesh. The new birth is also likened to a resurrection in Eph.2:1 and to a creation in 2 Cor.5:7. Birth, resurrection, and creation are all things in which men are wholly passive.
2. The new birth is entirely different from anything that nature can produce. Natural man cannot love God, Romans 8:8; 1 Cor.2:14. God Himself will give a new heart to His people, Ezekiel 36:26,27; Deut. 30:6; Jeremiah 31:33. We are His workmanship **created** in Christ Jesus, Ephesians 2:10.

3. Faith and repentance, while required of all men as a duty, are given to the elect as a gift of God's free grace. They are the **effect** of the new birth, not the **cause**. The faith by which we are saved is not of ourselves, but of God, Ephesians 2:8,9. It is a gift **given** to us "in the behalf of Christ," Philippians 1:29. Sinful man would never attend to the things spoken by God were there not first an opening of the heart, Acts 16:14; 18:47. All the elect of God receive this special call and believe the gospel, "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed," Acts 13:48.
4. These gifts of faith and repentance are bestowed upon men in a way that is immediate, decisive, and irresistible. God gives His people the spirit of wisdom that the "eyes of their understanding" might be enlightened. Ephesians 1:17,18. In 2 Cor. 4:6 this enlightening is said to require the power of the one who "commanded the light to shine out of darkness." No man is able to come to come to Christ apart from the drawing influence of the Father, but all that the Father gives the Son will come, John 6:37,44. Although the Son has power over all flesh, yet He gives life only to those given Him by the Father, John 17:2. In this divine call there is a renewing of the will, as well as of the understanding and affections, so that the people of God "shall be willing in the day of His power," Psalms 110:3. God works in His people both to will and to do His good pleasure, Philippians 2:13. This inward call to faith does not come to men as a result of their striving or doing, but is a result of the purpose of God beginning with predestination and ending with glorification, Romans 8:30.
5. The inward and efficacious call of God that ends in salvation is a sovereign call. No man can know the Father except the Son reveals Him, Matthew 11:25-27. It is God who makes men to differ one from another, 1 Cor. 4:7. He brings His people to the new birth "of His own will," James 1:18. To them it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom, Matthew 13:10, 11. It is not said of unbelievers that they are not sheep because they do not believe, but, rather, it is said that they do not believe because they are not sheep, John 10:26. The sheep, on the other hand, hear the voice of the shepherd, verse 10.

Questions:

1. In the parable of the sower some seed fell into good ground which the Lord interprets as a good heart. Where did this good heart come from?
2. If it is something that man must do to make himself differ from all others thereby making himself a good heart, what, precisely, is it that is required?
3. If it is some sort of desire or endeavor that is required, what degree of same is necessary in order to be acceptable to God?
4. How is God able to keep glorified saints in heaven, without possibility of falling for all eternity, without violating their free-will?

We conclude that in addition to the outward call of the gospel, there is an inward and efficacious call to the elect that infallibly results in their salvation, Hebrews 9:15; Jude 1. God saves His people with a **holycalling**, not according to their works, desires, or endeavors, 2 Timothy 1:9. The gospel comes to the elect **not in word only**, but also in power, 1 Thessalonians 1:5. The people of God are blessed with Simon Peter, who, after making a good confession at Caesarea Philippi, heard these words from the Lord, "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father, who is in heaven," Matthew 16:17.

Negative

Keith Sharp

Death is the result of separation (James 2:26). Sin brings death (Romans 6:23), i.e., separation from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). If one dead in sin is unable to obey the gospel by faith, why is one "dead to sin" able to heed Satan's call and serve him? (Romans 6:11-16)

Calvinists insist the inward call of the Spirit to salvation is "irresistible." But Stephen reprimanded the Jewish leaders thus: "You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you." (Acts 7:50) They resisted the Holy Spirit by refusing the Word of God (verses 51-52). The Holy Spirit calls through the Word, and men can and do resist His call.

Do we misrepresent Calvinism? Suppose all the people of a community became terminally ill with a malady that made all food disgusting to them. Food was abundant, but they could not eat. A doctor found a remedy to restore their appetite. Rather than giving this medicine to all, he, for no apparent reason, elected some to life and left the others to die. Those who received the medicine ate nourishing food and lived. Those left untreated died. Should the doctor be praised or prosecuted? Calvinists maintain that all mankind inherently despise the gospel of salvation. They contend God, through no reason discernible by man, chooses to supernaturally change the hearts of some so they believe the gospel unto salvation and leaves the rest to perish. Where's the misrepresentation?

Calvinists believe that if our salvation in any way depends on us, we cannot truly say, "God saves sinners." "[T]he Lord saved Israel ... out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Exodus 14:23; cf. 14:13; 15:1-2) and received the glory, but Israel had to march through the Red Sea to be saved (Exodus 14:15, 22, 29). The Lord saved Israel from Midian and received the glory (Judges 7:2, 14-15). But Gideon and 300 Israelites had to break pitchers, hold up torches, and shout in order to be saved (Judges 7:16-22). The obedience of faith unto salvation glorifies God rather than robbing Him of glory.

Dave again misuses Ephesians 2:8, implying the "gift" of the verse is faith. Once again, as Albert Barnes, the notable Presbyterian scholar commented:

*The word rendered **that** ... is in the neuter gender, and the word **faith** ... is in the feminine. The word "that," therefore, does not refer particularly to faith, as being the gift of God, but to **the salvation by grace** of which he had been speaking.*
(Notes. 42)

Dave, don't repeat the mistake of trying to align me with Barnes, Calvinism. The fact a Presbyterian scholar makes my point for me greatly strengthens the point. Answer the argument.

Of course the new birth, the spiritual resurrection, and the new creation are of God. But the new birth is "through the word of God" (1 Peter 1:22), "the gospel." (verse 25) God raises us when we are baptized (Romans 6:3-6; Colossians 2:11-12). God creates us anew in Christ, but we must "put off the old man with his deeds" and "put on the new man." (Colossians 3:9-11) In the physical realm, those created, raised, and born are passive. As the foregoing passages prove, this is not so in the spiritual realm. We should apply biblical figures only as the Scriptures apply them.

"[T]hose ... in the flesh" (Romans 8:8) are those who "set their minds on the things of the flesh." (verse 5). Some "saints" are "carnal" (1 Corinthians 1:2; 3:1-3) Did they resist the Holy Spirit?

Beginning in 1 Corinthians 1:18, Paul contrasts human and divine wisdom. Divine wisdom comes from the Holy Spirit through the inspired Word (1 Corinthians 2:6-13). The "natural man" is guided by human wisdom (including theology and denominational creeds), whereas the "spiritual man" is guided by the Word of God (verses 14-16). The "natural" man is "carnal." (3:1-3) Some saints are carnal. Did they resist the Holy Spirit?

Calvinists cannot consistently assert that for God to put His Spirit within us (Deuteronomy 30:6; Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:26-27; Jeremiah 31:33) means supernatural regeneration, for Calvinists admit the Holy Spirit dwells in the elect only after regeneration. God commanded Israel, "get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit." (Ezekiel 18:31) They had to do something themselves to have a new heart and new spirit. The heart is purified by faith (Acts 15:9), and faith comes from hearing the Word of God (Acts 15:7-9).

The fact God granted the Philippians faith (Philippians 1:29) neither states nor implies miraculous regeneration. The Lord sent inspired preachers to them (Acts 16:6-12). Their preaching led the Philippians to believe (Acts 16:13-14, 25-34). The Lord opened Lydia's heart by directing preachers of the Gospel to her (Acts 16:6-12). The Holy Spirit operated directly, not on the hearts of sinners, but upon inspired preachers.

We should pray for the Lord to give people "the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him." (Ephesians 1:15-18) If this denotes miraculous work of the Holy Spirit on the sinner's heart, there is no need to preach the Gospel, for the Holy Spirit would miraculously impart both knowledge and wisdom. Miraculous wisdom and knowledge were spiritual gifts given to Christians and ceased when the New Testament revelation was complete (1 Corinthians 12:7-8; 13:8-13). If the "spirit" of Ephesians 1:18 is the Holy Spirit, why did Paul pray for those "faithful in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 1:1) to receive Him? The "spirit" of this verse is an attitude conducive to receiving wisdom and knowledge. God can and does impart such a spirit through His Word and providence.

2 Corinthians 4:6 speaks of the revelation given by the Holy Spirit to the apostles and inspired evangelists to enable them preach Christ (2 Corinthians 1:19; 3:5-6; 4:1-5). Then revelation was in "earthen vessels," i.e., inspired men (2 Corinthians 4:7). Now it is in an inspired Book.

To come to the Son we must be drawn by the Father (John 6:37,44). How does the Father draw us? "It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God., Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me." (John 6:45)

Those who receive eternal life are the ones the Father gives to the Son (John 17:2). But He draws them by teaching them (John 6:45).

Of course God's people are willing (Psalm 110:3). Calvinists just assume and assert that the direct operation of the Holy Spirit makes them willing.

God works in His people "both to will and to do for His good pleasure." (Philippians 2:13) Directly and supernaturally? The "love of Christ," revealed in the Gospel, "compels us" to live for Him who died for us (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

God calls whom He predestined (Romans 8:30). God predestined that those with a humble and good heart would come to Christ by faith and be saved (Matthew 5:3; 11:25-26; Luke 8:15). We must "strive" to find the way (Luke 13:23-24).

The Son reveals the Father to sinners (Matthew 11:25-27) through the Word of the apostles (1 Corinthians 2:7-13; Ephesians 3:1-11).

Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 4:7 is that no Christian differs from another Christian. We all received what we know from the Word of the apostles (1 Corinthians 2:7-13).

"Of His own will He brought us forth," but He did so "by the word of truth." (James 1:18)

Those "given ... to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 13:10-11) are those "with a noble and good heart." (Luke 8:15)

The Lord's sheep are those who hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:27). Those who fail to hear His voice are not His sheep and will not believe (John 10:26).

Answers to Questions:

(1) We can make our hearts good (Ezekiel 18:31), and God through His Word and providence shows us how and encourages us to do so (Deuteronomy 30:6; Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:26-27; Jeremiah 31:33).

(2) Our hearts must be humble and good (Matthew 5:3; 11:25-26).

(3) We must be humble and honest enough to believe and obey Christ (John 8:24; Luke 8:15).

(4) Satan, the great tempter, will have been cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10).

God calls us (Hebrews 9:15; Jude 1) by the Gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14), not on the basis of our works, but on the basis of His own purpose and grace (2 Timothy 1:9).

The Word came to Thessalonica with the apostolic miracles (cf. Acts 15:12). Is the Gospel "the power of God to salvation" or not? (Romans 1:16)

Is the revelation of Jesus Christ through the Gospel (Matthew 16:17) or an inner light? Why is the Calvinists' inner light any better than the Mormons' or the Muslims'?

My friend has not supplied even one verse which states or implies that "the Holy Spirit operates directly and supernaturally upon the hearts of elect sinners to regenerate their dead hearts and to irresistibly draw them to Christ." Calvinistic belief in the direct, supernatural operation of the Spirit to regenerate sinners is not based on the Scriptures but on their own false system of human philosophy.

Response

David Landon

Keith asks, "Do we misrepresent Calvinism?" Then follows his story of a doctor who refuses to apply his skills to a sick community. I reply that until Keith is willing to add the essential facts to his story, he misrepresents not only Calvinism, but the gospel as well. Consider, the doctor is not merely a doctor, but Lord and Sovereign of the community. The food of the kingdom disgusts the people because it is provided by their Lord, and they hate him. They are his sworn enemies. They have stolen his lands and slain his son. The Lord of the community would be perfectly just if he were to send his armies to punish his subjects. It is of mere grace and mercy that the good doctor saves any of them. The Lord doctor publishes a treaty, and has the terms of it proclaimed to his people. They understand the terms and conditions of reconciliation but they refuse them, because they hate both the Lord doctor and his conditions. Their Lord, however, is determined to have subjects who love him and so, while his subjects are sleeping (regeneration), he applies a secret potion to a great number of them. This potion restores not only their appetite, but their love for their Lord (conversion).

Does Keith misrepresent Calvinism? How many of the above facts did he leave out of his story? Scripture does not say that while we were sick Christ died for us, but, rather, while we were sinners and enemies. This is why men are unable to obey the gospel, and yet are "able to heed Satan's call." Mankind, fallen in Adam, loves what Satan commands. Obedience is easy.

The Jewish leaders in Acts 7:51 resisted the outward call of the Holy Spirit coming to them in the Scriptures. Indeed, fallen man is not able not to resist (Turretin). It is our intention, by the word "irresistible," to signify what the power of God's grace is able to accomplish in the elect. We confess that all men resist God, but this resistance, in the elect, is neither total nor final. Those who are "the called," (Romans 8:28) will be infallibly brought to justification and glorification, (vs. 31).

Keith continues to believe that Calvinists teach unconditional salvation. He writes, "Calvinists believe that if our salvation in any way depends on us, we cannot truly say, "God saves sinners." Keith made this misrepresentation in our debate on the atonement, and I thought I had put it to rest. Calvinists believe in unconditional election. Salvation is conditioned upon faith and repentance. We do say that if our election in any way depends on us we cannot truly say, "God saves sinners." That sinners elect themselves is Keith's position, as evidenced in our debate on predestination, where he writes, "Individual sinners determine whether or not they will be among the elect..." Justifying faith is itself a gift of God, Eph. 2:8,9. Albert Barnes would be the first to say that I did not misuse this text. As I have noted previously, if there is an argument on this text, Barnes answers it himself just four sentences after Keith's quote where he writes, "It [faith] exists in the mind only when the Holy Ghost

produces it there, and is, in common with every other Christian excellence, to be traced to his agency on the heart." Calvinists do apply biblical figures, "as the Scriptures apply them." Keith's mistake here is to assume that in the physical realm those created, raised, and born are only passive. There is an active element as well. Creatures, having been acted upon, begin to act. Lazarus, being raised from the dead, must come forth. Men give active evidence of having been born. God does not breathe for us. This same passive/active tension is in the spiritual realm as well. The old theology books distinguished between passive and active conversion. Passive conversion (regeneration) was defined as God's sovereign impartation of a principle of life to a dead sinner, enabling him to exercise faith and repentance (conversion). The context in which the words creation, raised, and born are used in Scripture clearly demonstrate God's sovereign action and man's passivity. Compare I Cor. 5:17 (new creature) with verse 18, "And all things are of God." The Ephesians 2:5-10 passage begins with a dead sinner (vs. 5) raised to new life (vs. 6) and all said to be his workmanship (vs. 10). In John 3 the sovereignty of the wind is used to illustrate our spiritual birth. Keith's theology leads him to ignore these biblical figures.

I am confident (based on my answers to Keith's 2nd and 3rd questions) that Keith will ask why we should be troubled to preach the gospel. Seeing that it is ineffectual apart from the Spirit's work in the heart, why continue doing what we have already confessed God is able to do without us? Keith forgets that the subject of God's saving work is man as sinner. Because the sinner is a man, and therefore a reasonable and responsible being, the word of God comes to him, "make yourselves a new heart." Because the man is a sinner, the new heart must come from God, "a new heart will I give you." Duty and promise are not contradictions. Keith comments on Ezekiel 18:31, "we can make our hearts good," and, on Romans 8:30, "God predestined that those with a humble and good heart would come to Christ by faith and be saved." We are not told why one with a good heart would need salvation. Were this mere nonsense it would be serious enough, but it goes beyond, undoing the very gospel of God's grace.

We conclude that because of man's sinful nature, the outward call of the gospel is not the only call of God, but to this outward call is joined the inner call of the Spirit, which, because it is God's work, is always effectual.

Affirmative

Keith Sharp

This, the fourth written debate between my good friend Dave Landon and myself on the differences between the Reformed Presbyterian Church and the church of Christ, is a discussion of the divine call to salvation. I affirm:

Resolved: The Scriptures teach that the only call to salvation God extends to sinners is through the gospel message and that this gospel message is completely able to bring dead sinners to saving faith.

We agree God calls sinners. The question is how. We agree that the Holy Spirit calls sinners. But does He do so by a direct, supernatural operation on the sinner's heart or by the instrument of the moral persuasion of the gospel? We even agree that God calls sinners through the gospel.

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14).

I contend this is the only call He issues. I also affirm the gospel has the power to impart life to dead sinners, bringing them, without any supernatural, inward call of the Spirit, to saving, obedient faith.

I have three questions for Dave:

- (1) Do you agree that what God performs through an instrument, God can properly be said to do?
- (2) Is it possible for the gospel apart from the direct operation of the Holy Spirit to bring a dead sinner to saving faith?
- (3) Does the Holy Spirit through a direct, supernatural, inward call bring dead sinners to saving faith even where the gospel has not gone?

How God Calls Sinners

The Testimony of Christ

The testimony of Jesus Christ supports the fact "that the only call to salvation God extends to sinners is through the gospel message." The Master taught that only those who are drawn by God can come to Him (John 6:44). But He explained how God draws sinners. "It is written in the prophets, "And they shall all be taught by God.

Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me." (John 6:45) God draws sinners by teaching them. They hear, learn, and come. The truth of the word brings freedom from sin (John 8:30-36).

The Lord gave the Great Commission to take salvation to all people of the world (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15-16). How did God ordain that lost sinners be saved? "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." (Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47)

Examples in Acts

The book of Acts records the fulfillment of the Great Commission (cf. Mark 16:20; Acts 1:8). According to these examples, what draws dead sinners to Christ?

On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles to preach the gospel to lost Jews and endowed the apostles with the power to proclaim the word to various nationalities by miraculously speaking their languages (Acts 2:1-11). Peter directed the multitude, "heed my words." (Acts 2:14) He then preached the gospel to them (Acts 2:15-39). He testified and exhorted with words (Acts 2:40). "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." (Acts 2:41) The Holy Spirit operated directly upon the apostles rather than their audience. They did not receive "the gift of the Holy Spirit" until after they repented and were baptized (Acts 2:38).

This pattern is found throughout Acts. People in Jerusalem believed through hearing the Word (Acts 4:4). Later "the word of God spread and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7). The Samaritans believed and were baptized because Philip "preached Christ to them." (Acts 8:5-13). Only later did they receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17). Both an "angel of the Lord" and the Holy Spirit directed Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26,29), but Philip "preached Jesus" to the eunuch to lead him to faith (verses 35-38). Saul of Tarsus saw the raised Lord in order to qualify him for the apostleship (Acts 9:3-6; 26:14-18), but the preaching of Ananias led him to salvation (Acts 22:16). The Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentile household of Cornelius as proof uncircumcised Gentiles could be saved (Acts 10:44-47; 11:17-18; 15:8-9), but they were saved by the words Peter preached (Acts 11:13-14; 15:7). In a special sense The Lord opened Lydia's heart by guiding the preachers to her (Acts 16:6-16), but He contacted her heart through the word Paul preached (Acts 16:14). The Philippian jailer and his household "believed in God" because Paul and Silas "spoke the word of the Lord to" them (Acts 16:29-34). The Bereans believed because "they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." (Acts 17:10-12). "[M]any of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized." (Acts 18:8). The Ephesians believed through the preaching of Paul (Acts 19:1-5; Ephesians 1:13-14). They received the Holy Spirit afterward (Ibid). Never did the Holy Spirit operate directly upon the sinner's heart to enable him to believe. Always the dead sinner was brought to saving faith by the gospel.

Testimony of Apostles

The apostles of Christ in their inspired letters concur. We are saved by the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1-2) and reconciled to God through the Word (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). God brings "us forth by the word of truth." (James 1:18). "His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue...." (2 Peter 1:2-4).

Power of Gospel

I also affirm "that this gospel message is completely able to bring dead sinners to saving faith." This attributes three powers to the gospel: it's ability to impart life to dead sinners, it's capacity to bring the unbelieving to faith, and it's power to save the lost.

The Word of God gives life (Psalm 119:50,93). The Master taught, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing." He immediately explained, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." (John 6:63).

The gospel brings faith to the unbelieving. Satan works to remove the word from the hearer's heart to prevent him from believing (Luke 8:12). We believe by the word (John 17:20). John penned his account of the Lord's life "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." (John 20:30-31) People cannot believe unless they hear (Romans 10:14). "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:17).

The gospel is completely able to save the lost. The gospel "is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes...." (Romans 1:16). The "implanted word ... is able to save your souls." (James 1:21).

The New Birth

Salvation is a new birth (John 3:3). One must be "born of water and the Spirit." (John 3:5) The Spirit works in the new birth through the incorruptible seed of the word (1 Peter 1:22-23). "Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you." (1 Peter 1:25). This is because the Holy Spirit by inspiration gave the words of the gospel (1 Corinthians 2:6-16). As the apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians, "For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." (1 Corinthians 4:15).

Conclusion

Far from being "a dead letter," "the word of God is living and powerful...." (Hebrews 4:12). The word of God is spiritual food for spiritually starving souls (Matthew 4:4). It is light to guide those astray out of the darkness of sin (Psalm 119:130). It is life producing seed (Luke 8:11).

*For as the rain comes down,
And the snow from heaven,
And do not return there,
But water the earth,
And make it bring forth and bud,
That it may give seed to the sower
And bread to the eater,
So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;
It shall not return to Me void,
But it shall accomplish what I please,
And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11).*

Indeed, **The Scriptures teach that the only call to salvation God extends to sinners is through the gospel message and that this gospel message is completely able to bring dead sinners to saving faith.**

*And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!"
And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life
freely. (Revelation 22:17).*

Negative

David Landon

If this present debate was on the subject of justification, and I took the position that we are justified by faith alone, I am quite certain that Keith would ask me where in the Bible do I find the word "alone." Where then, in this debate, does Keith find that God calls sinners to salvation **only** through the gospel? Is this word "only" in any of the proof texts quoted in Keith's affirmative? Keith himself admits that we are both agreed that God calls sinners, that the Holy Spirit calls sinners, and that sinners are called through the gospel. Having read through Keith's affirmative several times, I can find no support for his position on this word *only*. There is not a single text given that goes beyond proving what Keith and I are already agreed on, namely, that God calls sinners through the gospel. It remains therefore that we answer Keith's three questions.

Question #1: Keith's first question concerns God's use of "instruments" or secondary means in the salvation of sinners. Can God properly be said to do that which He does through an instrument? I assume that the instrument Keith has in mind is the "moral persuasion of the gospel." In answer to the question I agree that whatever work God effects through secondary means is His doing. We need, however, to ask a further question. Are the means or instruments used by God to accomplish His purpose always effectual or efficacious in and of themselves, or do they sometimes require an act of God's power to make them effectual? The ark was effectual in itself as a means to keep Noah and his family safe during the flood. The clay used to anoint the blind man's eyes and the words "come forth" spoken to Lazarus were both means used by Jesus to effect a miracle, but neither was effectual without an exertion of Divine power. The gospel is the instrument used by God to save His people. It is not, however, a means effectual in and of itself, for, if it were, it would always produce the same results wherever it was proclaimed. But we see from Acts 28 :24 that this is not the case. We see there that Paul was *persuading* the Jews out of the law of Moses and out of the prophets from morning till night. Here you have the greatest of the apostles using the means of moral persuasion for an entire day. We read of the result in verse 24, "And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not." How do we account for such different results from the same means? Our position is that God makes us to differ one from another, 1 Cor. 4:7. The people of God are called not in word only, but in power and in the Holy Ghost, 1 Thessalonians 1:5.

Question #2: It is our position that the gospel is an ineffectual means for bringing dead sinners to faith apart from the direct operation of the Holy Spirit. It is, after all, a *dead* sinner we are considering. An unregenerate man retains all that is natural in the use of his faculties. He is able to understand propositions, he is able to will and desire things, and his affections are capable of being stirred. Therefore, because he is a man, he is able to understand the content of

the gospel, but because he is a spiritually dead man he is not able to understand or desire spiritual things in a saving manner. An unregenerate man has no heart for the gospel. God is not in all his thoughts, Psalms 10:4. There are none who understand or seek after God, Romans 3:11. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that "the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him, neither *can* he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Paul viewed all men as being either natural or spiritual. The idea of a middle state, comprised of natural men, who are yet able to please God by spiritual acts such as faith or repentance is utterly foreign to the apostle, and destructive of his entire argument. Natural man, while able to receive notions of the truth, is not able to receive the love of it. He will be, as Scripture says, "ever learning, but never coming to a knowledge of the truth."

Question #3: We answer that the Holy Spirit is able to bring sinners to faith even where the gospel has not gone. In chapter ten of the Westminster Confession Of Faith we read, "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how He pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word," WCF, 10:4. It should be noted that the contrast in this section is not between elect infants and non-elect infants. The phrase simply shows that some of God's elect die in infancy, and that the providence of God extends even to these. God's grace comes **extra-ordinarily** to those incapable of reason. **Ordinarily** God calls men "by His Word and Spirit," (see!). The upshot of the whole is that God is sovereign; He works when, where, and how He pleases. It is He who makes men to differ, I Cor. 4:7. I have often said that none of the non-Calvinistic theologies of salvation are able to give a consistently Biblical presentation of God's sovereignty. By way of proof, consider the following quote from a tract written by Keith, and distributed by the Tri-County Church of Christ. The title is You must be born again. Keith writes, "You must be born again. You must allow the Spirit of God to lead you through the word of God, the gospel, to believe in Jesus Christ, repent of your sins, confess your faith in Christ, and be baptized in water for the remission of sins. If you will do this, you will become a son of God. . ." Who is really the sovereign here? The Holy Spirit is the agent doing the work of regeneration, but how does His sovereignty appear if He must be *allowed* to do His work? Obviously the one doing the allowing is the true sovereign. As one writer put it, this concept of God's sovereignty has God adding a cosmic "me too" to the sinners decision to accept Christ.

We affirm that the Spirit is sovereign in calling sinners. Not all men have been called by the gospel. Many others have been outwardly called, who yet have not received the inward call of the Spirit, Matt. 22:14. The call that comes to God's elect always issues in justification and glorification, Romans 8:30.

Whenever a Calvinist uses the word *irresistible* in connection with grace he is straightway charged with denying free will. Keith himself has levied this charge. In the November 14, 1999 church bulletin for the Tri -County Church of God there is an article written by Keith entitled The Sovereignty Of God And Man's Free Will. Keith writes, "The basis of Calvinism is the belief that the sovereignty of God rules out the free will of man." Is Keith able to produce even one reputable Calvinist who denied free will? Even Luther, who had nothing good to say about free will, saying that it equipped man only for milking cows and building houses, and, in another place challenging Erasmus to create even one frog in the name of free will, yet went on in that same book (The Bondage Of The Will) to allow free will all that Scripture admits. And Scripture admits the following:

1. Adam was created upright, with freedom and power to do good, yet mutably, and with a possibility of falling. (See WCF 9:2).
2. Through the fall of Adam, man has lost all ability to will spiritual good. When we say grace is irresistible, we do not mean that man is unable to resist God's grace. The unregenerate always resist, Acts 7:51. As the 17th century theologian Turretin put it, the "unregenerate are not able not to resist. (WCF 9:3).
3. That man is spiritually dead and unable to convert himself does not compromise the natural liberty of his will. There is no external constraint upon him to do evil. Neither is he restrained from doing good if he pleases. (WCF 9:1).
4. By the grace of regeneration a man is freed from his bondage to sin, and enabled to will that which is good. (WCF 9:4).

We conclude that while the outward preaching of the gospel is, to rational men, a **necessary means** of salvation, it is not a **sufficient means**. To make it a sufficient means is to make nonsense of the very gospel you are preaching. God's grace, not man's wisdom, makes one to differ from another. God's irresistible grace.

Response

Keith Sharp

Thanks, Dave, for defending what you believe and conducting yourself honorably.

If my proposition were found word for word in the Scriptures, no Bible believer could debate it. In my first affirmative, I sought to give every New Testament passage that tells us how God calls sinners. They constitute the divine pattern (cf. 2 Timothy 1:13) on this subject. They teach that God calls sinners through the Gospel. Therefore, the Scriptures necessarily imply "that the only call to salvation God extends to sinners is through the gospel message." Dave's failure to produce a passage which teaches a direct, supernatural, inward call confirms this conclusion. This parallels an issue on which Reformed Presbyterians and members of the church of Christ agree. Since the New Testament expressly enjoins singing in worship in the New Testament age (e.g., Ephesians 5:18-19), singing is the **only** kind of music we should employ in worship. Presbyterians believe:

Faith... is the alone instrument of justification; yet it is not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love. (Westminster Confession of Faith. 13:2).

James inquired rhetorically, "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?" (James 2:14). He replied, "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." (James 2:24). Salvation and justification are equivalent and come by "faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6). If Dave will produce a passage that teaches, "You see then that God calls sinners directly and supernaturally by the inward operation of the Holy Spirit and not by the Gospel alone," I will gladly surrender my proposition.

Dave admits "that whatever work God effects through secondary means is His doing." Thus, none of the passages which teach the Holy Spirit plays a part in our salvation teach that He does so directly and supernaturally. God draws sinners by teaching them (John 6:44-45). The Spirit imparts life through His Word (John 6:63). We are born of the Spirit through the Gospel (1 Peter 1:22-25). Dave revealed our essential difference on this issue when he wrote, "The gospel is the instrument used by God to save His people. It is not, however, a means effectual in and of itself...." **Calvinists deny the saving power of the Gospel.** "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power **of God** (emphasis mine - KS) to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek." (Romans 1:16).

The point in context in 1 Corinthians 4:7 is that Christians should not differ from each other.

The power that the Gospel came with at Thessalonica was apostolic signs and wonders (Acts 15:12). Do Presbyterian preachers miraculously heal the sick and raise the dead?

The Word of God has the power to impart life to dead sinners (John 6:63).

Calvinists conclude God can (None deny the "can" part) and does call some of His elect apart from the Word. Thus, the divine power is not in the Gospel but in the direct operation of the Holy Spirit. **Calvinists deny the saving power of the Gospel.** Their position implies that non-elect infants, dying at birth, are consigned to hell, though they have done no wrong and have never had the opportunity to hear and believe the Gospel. Further, their position implies that elect adults who never hear the Gospel are saved nonetheless. Why, then, did the Lord give the Great Commission? (Mark 16:15).

I believe in the sovereignty of God as strongly as any Calvinist. God does not have to treat us as robots to be sovereign! There is no greater statement of divine sovereignty than Galatians 6:7-8:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

We can choose to live for Christ or to spurn Him, but we cannot mock His will with impunity. Now that's divine sovereignty!

Yes, we must allow Christ into our hearts. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20). But we must answer in judgment for our decision (John 12:48).

Matthew 22:14, "For many are called, but few are chosen," is disastrous for Calvinists. It concludes the Parable of the Wedding Feast (verses 1-14). People refused to come of their own free will (verse 3). Those who refused the invitation did so because they "were not worthy." (verse 8) Some of the chosen were later cast out (verses 9-13).

Certainly God called those whom He predestined (Romans 8:30). God has predestined to give "eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality." (Romans 2:7). "For there is no partiality with God.." (Romans 2:11).

Dave challenges me "to produce even one reputable Calvinist who denied free will...." He correctly defines free will thus: "Adam was created upright, with freedom and power to do good, yet mutably, and with a possibility of falling." (**WCOF**). In the very next sentence Dave claims, "Through the fall of Adam, man has lost all ability to will

spiritual good." Dave, thou art the man! A beast lacks free will because it lacks the ability to choose between good and evil. It does what it wills but lacks the ability to do otherwise. According to Calvinism, the unregenerate cannot will to believe, and the regenerate cannot will to disbelieve. Where's free will?

The Scriptures teach that the only call to salvation God extends to sinners is through the gospel message and that this gospel message is completely able to bring dead sinners to saving faith.