

# **REGENERATION AND RESISTIBLE GRACE: A SYNERGISTIC PROPOSAL**

## **by Adam Dodds<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents a synergistic account of regeneration/conversion focusing on the resistibility of God's grace and the nature of human participation in regeneration. The synergistic proposal is advanced whilst avoiding the twin dangers of monergism, in which God is the sole determinant of eschatological salvation and damnation, and Pelagianism, which undermines the gospel of grace. Differing crucially from John Wesley's account of prevenient grace, I sketch the resistibility of God's grace in divine providence and revelation thus establishing a pattern of divine working from which to interpret God's resistible work in regeneration/conversion. I then give an account of human participation addressing the bondage and freedom of the will, the nature of human cooperation in regeneration/conversion, and how this is commensurate with salvation by grace through faith alone. Therefore, this accounts for God's desire to save all and the fact that only some have responded in faith to Christ.

Key Words: Regeneration, conversion, resistible grace, human bondage & freedom, synergism

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## Introduction

Regeneration is often described as a divine work of grace which changes the rebellious human heart by the divine infusion of life and marks the beginning of new life in Christ.<sup>2</sup> Conversion is then often depicted as a human act of turning from a self-centred to a God-centred life in response to God's prevenient, awakening and regenerating grace, and as such it is a human act that can and ought to have many repetitions. It is true that there is a difference between joining God's family (regeneration or initial conversion) and growing in the family likeness (sanctification or continuous conversion). Although this depiction is helpful, I believe that the two terms regeneration and (initial) conversion, and the realities they describe, cannot so easily be differentiated because, with Emil Brunner, they are different aspects of the same happening.<sup>3</sup> They are in fact two inseparable and mutually related aspects of the one integrated movement in which divine and human action operate synergistically and reciprocally, though God is always the initiator. That is why I will be referring to 'regeneration/conversion' as a unified whole. In this movement God rescues the human sinner from love of sin and self through the working of the Holy Spirit who mysteriously causes and enables the sinful creature to enter into fellowship with Christ to the extent that he/she shares in His Sonship. The person is thus 'born from above' and 'born of the Spirit' by an act of God. Karl Barth says 'It is He who makes men Christians, and He does so by calling them to Himself, to His discipleship, to a life in direct fellowship with Him'.<sup>4</sup> Regeneration/conversion is the doctrine concerned with new birth and how this occurs, and my contention is that God does not regenerate/convert a person without their free and willing participation which is enabled by God, but can be withheld.

From Scripture and experience it is clear that God does not regenerate every person, at the very least, in this life.<sup>5</sup> There is a tradition concerning divine providence stemming from Augustine who taught that 'the will of the omnipotent is always undefeated'.<sup>6</sup> Following in this tradition, the magisterial Reformers and their successors taught that the reason that only some people experience regeneration is found in the hidden divine decree of predestination. The Westminster Confession says 'By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.'<sup>7</sup> However, this seems to fly in the face of repeated biblical affirmations of the apostles Paul, Peter and John that God desires that all be saved (1 Tim. 2:4),<sup>8</sup> that all come to repentance (2 Pet.3:9), for Christ died for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

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<sup>2</sup> J. Andrew Kirk suggests that regeneration is a single divine act, 'a single event in which God brings to birth a new nature within the person who trusts Jesus Christ for salvation'. *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics Vol.3: The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation* trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), p. 281.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* E.T. and ed. G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-75), IV/3 *Second Half*, p. 650. It would be misleading and inaccurate to discuss this subject apart from the call to mission in which God calls people not only to Himself but also to His service; the two are inseparable. However, for the purposes of this discussion I will here focus on regeneration/conversion proper.

<sup>5</sup> My purpose here is not to speculate concerning alleged post-mortem opportunities for repentance or the subject of universalism. Whether universalism is true, and one must certainly hope that this is so, it is evident that in this earthly life not all experience regeneration and conversion. It is this fact that I am attempting to give an account of.

<sup>6</sup> *Enchiridion* XXVI. 102.

<sup>7</sup> The Westminster Confession, quoted in George S. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession for Today: A Contemporary Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 49.

<sup>8</sup> Marshall shows this to be the teaching of the Pastoral epistles. I. Howard Marshall, 'Universal Grace and Atonement in the Pastoral Epistles' in Clark H. Pinnock (ed.) *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), 51-69.

Accordingly, I find this monergistic explanation to be logically coherent but biblically problematic and so, in its place, I propose a synergistic account of regeneration/conversion.

My aim in this paper is to present two aspects of a doctrine of regeneration/conversion that is theologically synergistic, that is, one in which the active participation of both God and the human are indispensable. This is in marked contrast to monergistic accounts of regeneration where all aspects of soteriology are exhaustively governed by the absolute divine decrees so that divine willing determines human willing. This genus has two species; one that embraces limited atonement such as the Westminster Confession and ends in eschatological double predestination,<sup>9</sup> and the other which upholds universal atonement thus inevitably ending in universalism. In monergistic accounts God alone decides the eschatological fate of every human person (traditionally called unconditional election); whereas the account which follows explains that God has pre-ordained that humans have critical determination regarding their own salvation (conditional election). God desires to establish a saving relationship with all but God does so not unilaterally but bilaterally, to include the free and willing cooperation of human persons, a cooperation that can be bafflingly withheld. Consequently, this accounts for both God's universal salvific desire and the ultimate partial frustration of this desire due to human stubbornness, ignorance and defiance.

Two essential theological components to such a synergistic account are the resistibility of divine grace and human participation in their own salvation, which are two complementary sides of the same theological coin. Due to the inter-related nature of theology this paper necessarily touches on numerous related doctrines but is unable to directly discuss them. Therefore, I assume a doctrine of universal atonement – that Christ died for all in order to save all. Additionally, I can no more than acknowledge that a conditional understanding of election logically accompanies the argument of this paper. My aim is not to give a synergistic account of regeneration/conversion per se, but to give a synergistic account of *God's resistible grace* and *human participation in* regeneration/conversion that is theologically rigorous, logically coherent and biblically faithful.

This paper begins by reviewing the theological basis of regeneration/conversion in the grace of God, before proceeding to the first of its subjects, human freedom. Here I argue for the bondage of the will, explain two different aspects of human freedom, and describe true human freedom as a trinitarian gift. This gift is inextricably related to regeneration itself as an irreducibly divine work. Changing focus from human to divine, I argue that God's grace is resistible in both divine providence and revelation, thus establishing a pattern of divine working to interpret God's work in regeneration/conversion. Finally, I discuss human participation in regeneration, explaining its nature and occurrence, the synergistic act of faith as a divine gift and a human act, and how this is fully commensurate with salvation by grace through faith alone.

### **Grace: The Basis of Regeneration/Conversion**

Brian Edgar says 'There are many things that individuals can do on their own, but being a Christian is not one of them.'<sup>10</sup> I would also add that becoming a Christian is not one of them. A person will not and cannot become a Christian apart from the prior and accompanying unmerited drawing action of God (and the evangelistic witness of the Church). So, classically and vitally, regeneration/conversion has its basis in God's creative love toward humanity and

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<sup>9</sup> Within this tradition the major alternative to double predestination is single predestination in which the elect are predestined to everlasting life and the reprobate are not actively predestined at all, but are simply 'passed over'. However, the eschatological outcome of this position is identical to that of double predestination.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Edgar, *The Message of the Trinity: Life in God* (The Bible Speaks Today: Bible Themes ed. Derek Tidball; Leicester: IVP, 2004), 290.

causes and enables the creature to love God in return. This love of God that stoops toward humanity in one seamless revealing, reconciling and redeeming movement is grace, and is the basis of regeneration/conversion. The divine motive is simply that God is love and so God has elected not to abandon His creation nor to permit it to languish in sinful self-destruction, but rather to act powerfully and redemptively to reclaim it as *His* creation. God's love for humanity expresses God's nature, but as God this expression is free and freely given. The purpose of this redemptive love is the creation of a community that is God's covenant partner which reflects God's love back to Him, but this response is a consequence of the prior divine loving rather than its condition.

God's unconditional love and grace is such that 'In Christ's action for the world and the Christian as fully completed in His passion, he [the Christian] can participate only passively, in pure faith in Him, love for Him and hope in Him, without making even the slightest or most incidental contribution.'<sup>11</sup> Christ's vicarious and reconciling atonement was done for all as a unilateral divine act so that, in Pinnock's words, 'God included everybody in it, without even asking.'<sup>12</sup> Speaking of this objective atonement Barth says, 'Even the suggestion of Christian co-operation in this respect, let alone any attempt at it, could only be evil...'<sup>13</sup> This is not only a reflection of God's saving action in Christ but is also a necessity in that humans were unable to redeem themselves, being bound to sin, death and the devil. For humanity to be freed God must intervene, for 'God alone is the merchant who can pay in the currency of eternity.'<sup>14</sup> That humans are made righteous by Christ through the Spirit is a work of pure grace, as indeed is that remarkable fact that humans can know God. Describing this grace Jenson rightly says, '...no more is our righteousness the success of our moral capacity than is our knowledge of God the success of our cognitive capacity.'<sup>15</sup> On this Christian theology is universally agreed, hence in universal and objective atonement God's grace is irresistible. The dispute remains over whether the nature of God's grace in subjective atonement is resistible or irresistible. Assuming God's universal salvific will, does God's grace inevitably and definitely regenerate all persons (universalism) or does God so act that He requires non-meritorious human cooperation which can be withheld? This question quickly becomes complicated by the matrix of related doctrines, namely human bondage, freedom and faith.

### **Bondage of the Will**

Biblically and theologically, the case for the bondage of the human will to sin is convincing.<sup>16</sup> Without entering into discussions of original sin, Jesus is clear that the person who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34). It is further clear that all humans have sinned and continue to sin (Romans 3:23; 5:12), so all are enslaved to sin and unable to free themselves. In John 8:31-2 Jesus told the Jews who had believed him 'If you continue in my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' Newbigin comments, 'His hearers rightly perceived that he was telling them that they were not, as they believed, free. They were in bondage to sin, and only the truth could set them free. And he, Jesus, was the one whose word was truth and who could therefore set them free.'<sup>17</sup> If this is true

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<sup>11</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/3 Second Half*, 605.

<sup>12</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 100.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/3 Second Half*, 605.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* trans. from 6<sup>th</sup> ed. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 62.

<sup>15</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1: The Triune God* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 230.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* trans. J. I. Packer & O. R. Johnston (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1957).

<sup>17</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt & Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 68.

of those who already believed in Jesus then it is certainly true that all people are in bondage to sin and so are unable to free themselves and are unable to freely respond to God's grace revealed in Christ. As Arminius says, the sinful human will is '...addicted to evil and it will not be bent to good except by grace.'<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, since the will is 'addicted to evil' it cannot even will to be free, as Bultmann says, 'A person cannot free himself from himself by his will, for just in such an act of the will he would remain the man he was.'<sup>19</sup>

One well known and ingenious solution to this theological problem was offered by John Wesley who consciously followed in the tradition of Arminius. For Wesley, humanity is naturally in bondage to sin due to the Fall and so cannot come to God except by grace, and yet he wants to uphold human freedom in order to avoid the consequence of unconditional election. Wesley's proposal is that from Christ's atoning sacrifice for all God's prevenient grace means '...that there is a measure of free will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which enlightens every man that cometh into the world.'<sup>20</sup> Prevenient grace is as objective and universal in its efficacy as the Fall and '...effects a partial restoring of our sin-corrupted human faculties,' including not only the will but also the mind and affections, 'sufficient that we might sense our need and God's offer of salvation, and respond to that offer.'<sup>21</sup>

There are many merits to Wesley's proposal including its affirmation of the bondage of the will, salvation by grace alone, its balancing of the objective and subjective dimensions of the atonement, and teaching that God enables people to respond to Him but that that cooperating response can be withheld. All of these, I believe, are thoroughly biblical. The one significant weakness in Wesley's scheme is the manner by which God enables people to respond to Him in repentance and faith. For Wesley prevenient grace is universal as a result of the universal atonement, but I do not see universal prevenient grace taught in Scripture, and so with Clark Pinnock I admire Wesley's proposal but have to reject it on scriptural grounds.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, for God to draw all people to Himself by prevenient grace divine revelation must be universally accessible. I do not believe general revelation can carry this burden and believe that God's self-revelation that leads to a saving knowledge of Christ is not universal but particular, because God reveals Himself through the missions of the Spirit and Church.<sup>23</sup> Therefore my proposal is to develop an understanding of regeneration that bears many similarities to Wesley's but which identifies God's prevenient grace as *particular* and not universal because God's self-revelation through the missions of the Spirit and the Church is specific and not general, most obviously through the communication of the gospel.

Saving faith follows the communication of the gospel (Rom. 10.13-15) and God has specifically ordained that the gospel be communicated through the Church.<sup>24</sup> For example, even though God speaks to people without ecclesial mediation, such as Cornelius in Acts 10, God

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<sup>18</sup> Jacobus Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius 3 Vols.* (London ed.), trans. James Nichols and William Nichols (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), *Vol. III*, 470-1, quoted in Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press & Zondervan, 1985), 215-6.

<sup>19</sup> Rudolf Bultmann quoted in Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*, 167.

<sup>20</sup> John Wesley, 'On Predestination Calmly Considered', *The Works of John Wesley* ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1879), vol. 10, 229-30, quoted in Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 32-3.

<sup>21</sup> Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, Abingdon Press, 1994), 87.

<sup>22</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, 'From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology' in Clark H. Pinnock (ed.), *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), 21-2.

<sup>23</sup> This is not apart from the ongoing mission of the exalted Christ who sent both the Spirit and the Church.

<sup>24</sup> C. K. Barrett says, 'Christ must be heard either in his own person, or in the person of his preachers, through whom his own word (v. 17) is spoken; otherwise faith in him is impossible'. *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 204.

instructs Cornelius (via an angel) to send for Peter who in turn explains the gospel to him leading to his salvation.<sup>25</sup> This story illustrates what many missiologists including Newbigin believe to be the central theme of the biblical story – election: ‘God’s choosing (election) of a people to be His own people, by whom He purposes to save the world’.<sup>26</sup> God accomplishes His universal mission by means of particular election as seen clearly in Abraham, Israel and the Church. Thus, the *modus operandi* of God’s prevenient grace is not by general but special revelation, for it is through the witness of the Church that God’s prevenient grace operates. This is because verbally communicating the gospel is speaking the Word of God,<sup>27</sup> which has creative power to effect what it pronounces.<sup>28</sup> Gospel communication is a speech-act, a performative utterance in which there is no dichotomy between speaking and doing; so God powerfully acts through human speech, creating the possibility of repentance and faith.<sup>29</sup> Corresponding to this is Hebrews 4:12, which affirms that the Word of God is living, active and powerful to penetrate into the innermost centre of a person. Thus God’s prevenient, awakening and convicting grace acts through the Church’s sharing of the gospel. Hence Braaten rightly says ‘the Christian conviction [is] that Christ and his church are God’s links of salvation to the world he loves. It is God himself who has elected particular means of grace to reach the universal end of salvation’.<sup>30</sup> This is the scandal of particularity that is virtually synonymous with God’s election of Israel, Christ, and the Church.<sup>31</sup>

### Human Freedom

All humanity is subject to what Luther called the bondage of the will and in that sense is not free. But in a different sense all humans retain freedom defined as self-determination. This is not understood as self-determination apart from external and internal influences, but people retain the ability to deliberate, to consider different possibilities whilst under various influences, and then to make decisions. In God’s grace He has granted to all humanity self-determination, or freedom of choice. In this sense Fiddes is right that ‘Freedom for the world therefore means self-limitation for God’, for at least sometimes, human determination and divine determination of human actions are mutually exclusive.<sup>32</sup> This is most evident when people sin, which is clearly a human act in which God plays no part. Therefore, in granting humans self-determination God limit’s the exercise of His omnipotence and chooses not to determine all human actions.

The bondage of the will does not mean that people will always and automatically choose the most sinful option available. On the contrary, Moltmann identifies two stages of human freedom the first of which is being able to choose between right and wrong, the good and the

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<sup>25</sup> I believe this is not only because God was intentionally including Gentiles within the scope of the Church and her mission, which required apostolic verification, but also illustrates how God advances His mission to the world.

<sup>26</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, ‘Why Study the Old Testament?’, *National Christian Council Review* 74 (1954), 75.

<sup>27</sup> According to Ladd, ‘In the New Testament, the Word of God is primarily the good news of the gospel, whether proclaimed by Jesus (Luke 5:1; 8:11; 11:28) or by the apostles (I Cor. 14:26; II Cor. 2:17; 4:2; I Thess.2:13).’ George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 255.

<sup>28</sup> For example, God’s chosen means of both creation and judgement is His own spoken Word (Gen. 1; John 1:1-3; and Rev. 19:15, 21).

<sup>29</sup> For more on speech-acts theory see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1975); John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). For an example of employing speech-act theory to the doctrine of creation, see Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 140.

<sup>30</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *The Flaming Centre: A Theology of the Christian Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 117.

<sup>31</sup> Elaborating in any further detail about the particularity of how God communicates His grace would take us beyond the present concern of this paper.

<sup>32</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), 165.

bad. Unregenerate humanity retains this capacity, which could be conceived of as the residual image of God. It is residual because humans can still choose between right and wrong but the fallen human will is like scales that have been tipped towards the wrong. But this is not the meaning of true freedom, for 'Freedom...is not arbitrariness, the absolute freedom to do what happens to enter the head or appear desirable at the time.'<sup>33</sup> The second stage of freedom that Moltmann identifies is the '...free practise of what is good...', choosing the good as a matter of course.<sup>34</sup> The first stage of freedom is the ability to choose, and the second and true stage of freedom is making the right choice. It is this second stage of freedom that accords with the Johannine Jesus and the Pauline use of the term. This human freedom is found and seen in the one who was and is the perfect image of God, Jesus, the one who was perfectly free and fully and authentically human, the one Luther called 'God's proper man'.<sup>35</sup>

Jesus is the only human to not have sinned and therefore to not have lived under the controlling power of sin. By virtue of his sinlessness and his divine nature He was the only one able to set other people free from sin. But true human freedom is not found by consciously not sinning, for in Jesus we do not see someone who is fixated on not sinning. Rather He gave Himself fully to the will of His Father and always sought to please His Father. The secret of true freedom as seen in Jesus is complete obedience to God the Father as led by the Spirit. Jesus only did what He saw the Father doing, He only spoke as taught by the Father, and at the end of His earthly life He says that He completed the work His Father had given Him to do (John 5:19; 8:28b; 17:4). In doing so, 'Jesus met and overcame sin in our nature, from within the enemy's territory.'<sup>36</sup> This vicarious obedience on behalf of all is an important aspect of the aforementioned objective atonement. True freedom consists in living a life of loving obedience to God, so how can humans who are in bondage to sin attain this freedom? Gunton rightly says that 'What human freedom is can be understood only in the light of the freedom that is the gift of God through Son and Spirit.'<sup>37</sup>

Humanity remains in a state of rebellion against God, the direct opposite of freedom. As such, '...man cannot extricate himself from this revolt. For everything that he undertakes is infected with it [sin]. Only the Creator can overcome the revolt.'<sup>38</sup> The consequence of the bondage of the will is the necessity of divine action to free humans from their sin thus ensuring the primacy of grace. In regeneration/conversion the Holy Spirit establishes a living relation between a person and Christ so that their sinful disobedience becomes His, in that He *became* sin, and His righteousness becomes theirs. In this wondrous exchange Jesus' loving and vicarious obedience is not only credited to the person but begins to work itself out within the reconciled person, setting them free. In this postlapsarian world human freedom is a gift of participating in Christ by the Spirit, but it is still a *human* freedom. Barth rightly says 'It is not the work of the Holy Spirit to take from man his own proper activity, or to make it simply function of His own overpowering control. Where He is present, there is no servitude but freedom.'<sup>39</sup> In this pneumatological work the Spirit does not take over the person's proper operations but, by effecting their participation in Christ sets them free and enables them to live out this loving obedience that has been achieved on their behalf. In this sense 'There is no rivalry between the divine freedom and the human', because human freedom is a gift of divine

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<sup>33</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 155.

<sup>34</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity & the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 214-5.

<sup>35</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Human Being, Individual and Social' in Colin E. Gunton (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 165.

<sup>36</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1956), 60.

<sup>37</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 144.

<sup>38</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics Vol.3*, 272.

<sup>39</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, 785.

freedom.<sup>40</sup> Freedom is a trinitarian gift in which God the Father sets a person free through Christ by the Spirit, and this is the essence of regeneration/conversion.

### **Regeneration – A Trinitarian Work**

Regeneration is uniquely a work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5) for it is only by God that a person can be born of God. When God the Father reveals His Son by His Spirit to a person through the Church's communication of the gospel, that person does not have eyes to see and ears to hear in order to receive this revelation. The true identity of God's Word made human is not humanly discerned, for in Jesus' response to Peter's messianic confession He says 'Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you...' (Matt. 16:17) It is not possible to confess Jesus' identity without divine revelation; the Spirit opened Peter's eyes and ears and enabled His response to Jesus. That is why Paul says, 'No one says Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:3). Scripture teaches this in various ways; people can only come to Jesus as drawn by God the Father (John 6:44) and can only exercise faith in Him as a heavenly gift (Eph. 2:8). Barth is surely right when he says, 'In the covenant relationship – the true relationship between God and man according to the witness of Scripture – the initiative is wholly and exclusively on the side of God.'<sup>41</sup> It belongs to God to initiate and to the human to respond.

The Spirit frees the human subject to '...receive and apprehend God's self-revelation and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.'<sup>42</sup> Describing this pneumatological operation, T. F. Torrance continues,

Only as God in Christ meets us and speaks to us personally through the presence and power of his Spirit do his self-revealing and self-imparting to us strike into the depths of our being and liberate us for communion with himself, making us capable of responding to him as Lord and Saviour with faith and love and understanding beyond our natural capacities altogether.<sup>43</sup>

Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom to recognise God in Christ and freedom to respond in love and trust. The Holy Spirit not only reveals God to the creature but also enables and effects the creaturely response. In the self-revelation of God in Christ by the Spirit the creature is issued with an invitation to fellowship. The World Council of Churches Council for World Mission and Evangelism declares that in the human act of conversion '...God himself through his Holy Spirit helps the acceptance of his offering of fellowship.'<sup>44</sup> That regeneration/conversion is a divine work is uncontroversial and enjoys widespread theological recognition, but what is more controversial is the nature of the Spirit's enabling. Specifically, is the operation of the Holy Spirit in the regeneration and conversion of God's image-bearing creatures able to be resisted by those creatures? Traditionally those who affirm the freedom of the will answer in the affirmative, whereas those who affirm the bondage of the will hold to irresistible grace. Having already argued for the bondage of the human will to sin I will, from this standpoint, proceed to argue for the resistibility of divine grace.

### **Resistible Grace in Divine Providence**

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<sup>40</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, 753. Similarly Jenson says, 'God's commands do not infringe our autonomy – to use that perilous word – they enable it.' Jenson, *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*, 231.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, 800.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 62.

<sup>43</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 63.

<sup>44</sup> Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, World Council of Churches, 'Mission and Evangelism – An Ecumenical Affirmation', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 7.2 (April 1983), 67.

In *Grace and Personality*<sup>45</sup> John Oman presents a resistible understanding of God's grace against views of grace that are mechanical or irresistible. For Oman, grace must be won and not compelled.<sup>46</sup> Paul Fiddes categorically asserts that 'God never acts in a coercive way. We might say that God does not *make* us do certain things, but that God influences and persuades us, or lures us with love, to co-operate with the divine mission.'<sup>47</sup> For Fiddes, God respects human self-determination as a core aspect of creaturely integrity. These comments pertain in particular to divine providence but also apply to soteriology, and directly suggest that God does not always have His way. Gregory Boyd identifies significant biblical motifs of God experiencing regret, God expressing frustration and God changing His mind, all of which indicate that God's purposes can be frustrated and partially thwarted.<sup>48</sup> After surveying similar themes Bruce Reichenbach concludes '...God's *immediate* purposes and plans are not always realised, for he has entrusted them to human hands.'<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the Old Testament God sought to call His people Israel back to the covenant but it appears that Israel successfully resisted these divine overtures. For example, in Ezekiel 33:11 God says 'As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?' In Stephen's speech that led to his martyrdom he offers an overview of the history of God's dealings with Israel in which he says, 'You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?' (Acts 7:51-52a) Underlying the theme common to these biblical quotations is a clear sense of divine frustration indicating that God's will is not irresistible. This biblical motif of persistent rebellion and resisting of the Holy Spirit was not only consigned to the Old Testament, because following Stephen's speech he was martyred for his truthful proclamation.

Jesus encountered this same resistance to God's purposes, for in Matthew 23:37 (parallel Luke 13:34) he says, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' That God's prophets are routinely persecuted constitutes compelling evidence for sinful humanity resisting God's grace. Perhaps the clearest example from the New Testament that the Lord's purposes are frustrated and successfully resisted by humans is Luke's comment, 'But by refusing to be baptized by him [John], the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.' (Luke 7:30) The God who is love has loving purposes for all people, and these purposes can be embraced or rejected. This biblical theme is not contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture that God will ultimately achieve His purposes for creation. The Scriptures also clearly teach that God is in the heavens and does as He pleases (Psalm 115:3), that He works all things according to the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). Putting these two strong biblical themes together does not require obscure theological gymnastics; the two fit together quite naturally, though not without some mystery. Forster and Marston comment, 'The Pharisees could not prevent God's ultimate plan from achieving its end. The new heavens and new earth will come, whether they want it or not...

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<sup>45</sup> London: Fontana, 1960.

<sup>46</sup> Discussed in Colin E. Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 103.

<sup>47</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 131.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, 'The Open-Theism View' in James K. Beilby & Paul R. Eddy (eds.) *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 26-35.

<sup>49</sup> Bruce Reichenbach, 'God Limits His Power' in David Basinger & Randall Basinger (eds.) *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986), 118, emphasis added.

But what they can do is to opt out personally of the new creation to come.<sup>50</sup> The mystery comes in when trying to distinguish at what levels these two biblical themes operate. It is tempting to suggest that the divine sovereignty theme operates at a macro level whilst human willing operates at a micro level, but this division would be overly simplistic. In summary, God accomplishes His purposes by weaving in the threads of both human obedience and disobedience, and there is no doubt God will achieve His mission, but some will exclude themselves from the kingdom of the beloved Son.

Biblically, God not only grants humans self-determination to resist His purposes, but He also then takes the human responses of obedience and disobedience into account in His loving providential rule over creation. This is perhaps most explicitly taught in the parable of the potter and the clay in Jeremiah 18:1-10. John Bright believes the point of Jeremiah 18:4 ‘...is precisely that the clay *can* frustrate the potter’s intention and cause him to change it: as the quality of the clay determines what the potter can do with it, so the quality of a people determines what God will do with them...’<sup>51</sup> This does not render God powerless but is simply factored into the divine rule of creation. Consequently, this completely undermines certain theologies of divine providence such as G. C. Berkouwer, who states ‘Scripture nowhere suggests that God’s work is limited by human activity.’<sup>52</sup> God’s work of accomplishing the *missio Dei* will certainly be completed but en route it has been and will continue to be partially frustrated and thwarted by human sinfulness. What bearing then, does this twin theme of divine sovereignty and resistible grace in providence have for regeneration/conversion?

We have already established that regeneration is a divine work, so without the operation of the Holy Spirit no one would believe, but the present activity of the Holy Spirit does not *ensure* belief but *enables* it. Boyd argues, ‘It is one thing to claim that without the Holy Spirit we *cannot* believe and quite another to say that with the work of the Holy Spirit we *must* believe. Scripture affirms the former but not the latter.’<sup>53</sup> Barth suggests something similar when he says God’s ‘...initiative aims at a correspondingly free act, at genuine obedience as opposed to that of a puppet, on the part of the man with whom the covenant is made.’<sup>54</sup> In other words, God has not made His grace irresistible because then the human response of repentance and faith would not be freely given but mechanical and inevitable.

### **Resistible Grace in Divine Revelation**

It is right and proper and necessary to stress the activity of God in revelation but this activity does not render the recipient of revelation passive. Barth expresses this well when he says ‘although the knowledge of God certainly does not come about without our work, it also does not come about through our work, or as the fruit of our work’.<sup>55</sup> Barth here acknowledges that although human ‘work’ cannot produce knowledge of God, for only God can do that, God does not do so without some form of active human participation because God has chosen to reveal Himself in a process that includes human cooperation. What is the nature of this human work or cooperation? Simply put, it is positively responding to God’s self-giving rather than resisting the Holy Spirit, hardening one’s own heart and resisting this gift of gifts. The critical human work is responding to God’s enabling invitation to fellowship, believing God’s Word to

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<sup>50</sup> Roger T. Forster & V. Paul Marston, *God’s Strategy in Human History: God’s Sovereignty and Man’s Responsibility* (Crowborough, East Sussex: Highland Books, 1989), 27-8.

<sup>51</sup> John Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1965), 125.

<sup>52</sup> *The Providence of God* trans. Lewis Smedes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 127.

<sup>53</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing A Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 83 emphasis original.

<sup>54</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, 800.

<sup>55</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1*, 182-3.

be just that and so responding in faith (Heb. 4.2) rather than hardening one's heart (Heb. 4:7 cf. Ps. 95.7-8). Since 'God is known in a reconciling act',<sup>56</sup> a crucial part of this reconciliation is faith. Paul describes in Romans 1:18ff how God has given to some people a measure of the knowledge of God (1.19-21), but despite this fact they loved their sin, were proud, foolish and did not render to God what is due. In response God gave them over to these things which resulted in their knowledge of God decreasing and deteriorating (vv. 25, 28). Resulting from divine self-revelation a person's knowledge of God can increase or decrease depending on the nature of their response. In revelation God is seeking to know and be known by His creatures created in His image and likeness but separated from Him by their rebellion and ignorance. But in God's self-presentation He requires a positive human response that can be withheld. This is evident in Revelation 3.20 where God says 'Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice an open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me'. The crucial human work is to open the door to God by believing, or by refusing God entry by hardening one's own heart.<sup>57</sup> Caird makes the useful point that Christ stands knocking, 'not with the timid tap that requests admission, but with the imperious hammering of the divine initiative, loud enough to penetrate even the deaf ears of Laodicea'.<sup>58</sup> In other words, the presence of the word of Christ summoning to repentance breaks through to the most spiritually hardened and enables, but does not replace, the required human response.

This is not Pelagianism but rather is a description of how in God's self-revelation His grace is resistible because God affirms creaturely integrity and courts a free, loving and grace-enabled human response. It is not weakness on God's part that He courts human love rather than demanding it in His omnipotence, for biblical love is always a free self-giving. Barth says, '...the idea love demands love is one which is intrinsically impossible,' because 'Giving is a very different thing from demanding.' He continues

It is the nerve of the whole relationship between the love of God and that of man that by the love of God man is put in a position to love, that he may do so, that he is not bullied or prodded to do so by any compelling authority from without, that he is really free – made free – to do so of himself in imitation of the self-giving of God. If this is not the case, what does it mean that in this connexion the Old Testament speaks so emphatically of the heart as the place where the whole movement is initiated? Surely it is not love from the heart, or with the whole heart, if there is any question of compulsion...<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, God in His revelation is neither weak nor a passive spectator. In revelation God actively works to overcome the alienation of the human mind and the misplaced affections of the human heart, revealing sin for what it truly is. God's love is powerful and creative, enabling the human response of faith and love which was previously impossible.

### **Human Participation in Regeneration**

Regeneration is a work of God but one in which the human subject can resist this grace of God, so consequently a regenerated person is one who has positively cooperated with the grace of God. This explains the reality, which is biblically and experientially verifiable, that not all respond to Christ in repentance and faith. Perhaps Paul reflects on this occurrence when he declares that God is the Saviour of all people, *especially* those who believe (1 Tim. 4.10)?

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<sup>56</sup> Murray Rae, 'Prolegomena' in P. Metzger (ed.) *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (London & New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2005), 13.

<sup>57</sup> Although the interpretation of this verse is vigorously debated, I follow Ladd's view that God is summoning members of a lifeless and complacent church to repentance and spiritual life. *A Commentary*, 67.

<sup>58</sup> George B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, reprint from London: A & C Black, 1966), 57.

<sup>59</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, 781.

Donald Bloesch captures this dynamic well when he says the atonement is ‘universal in its outreach and intention but particular in its efficacy’.<sup>60</sup> Explaining this in terms of forgiveness, Jesus has already unconditionally forgiven sinful humanity (Lk. 23.34) prior to any evidence of penitence or repentance. In doing so, God has taken the initiative in a creative but risky act that seeks to evoke a positive response. But, as Fiddes says, ‘This does not mean that forgiveness, in the sense of reconciliation, can be *completed* without any response. Forgiveness must be received, and reception means a whole change of being’; in biblical terms, repentance and faith.<sup>61</sup> Given God’s universal salvific will, human cooperation with or resistance of God’s grace is critical and thus goes some way toward explaining why some respond to the gospel and others do not.

Protestant theology has always been aware of this logical option but has by and large rejected the path in which I am proceeding. Brunner explains,

Post-Reformation theology indeed denied this presence of the human partner, in order to prevent any possibility of man having any share of merit or any reason for self-congratulation, boasting, and it believed that it was necessary to surrender the role of the human subject as itself present, and to reduce it to the pure passivity of an object. But in doing so it completely destroyed the Pauline conception.<sup>62</sup>

Brunner rightly identifies the understandable concern to minimise or even exclude human subjectivity in regeneration/conversion is in order to be faithful to salvation by grace and not works. The fear is a person’s ‘contribution’ to their own salvation smacks of works thus undermining the gospel of grace. I intend to address these concerns by outlining the nature of human participation in regeneration, describing the act of faith, and explaining how this does not contradict salvation by grace alone.

### **How Can the Sinful Human Participation in Regeneration?**

Due to total depravity and the bondage of the will, humans cannot extricate themselves from their bondage to sin. Put positively, only God can save and salvation is by grace alone, however, God will not save a person without their willing participation. Typically in the New Testament this response of willing participation consists of repentance and faith.<sup>63</sup> But this response of repentance and faith is not possible for the sinner who loves their sin and is hostile to God. Affirming that the initiative always lies with God, Brunner construes this human participation as ‘...the man who lets himself be summoned by the message of Jesus Christ.’<sup>64</sup> Again it must be said that a sinner who is hostile to God will not let themselves be summoned by the gospel unless through the kerygma God’s enabling grace is present. The sinner’s free will is bound to sin and so is unable to cooperate with divine grace, for as Arminius says, ‘Free will is unable to begin or perfect any true spiritual good, without Grace.’<sup>65</sup> Describing Arminius’ solution to the problem, Carl Bangs says ‘it is free will that is saved, and the saved free will concurs in its salvation.’<sup>66</sup> Peering more deeply into this mystery, *how* does this occur? God, in His grace, partially awakens sinners to the extent that the free will is at least slightly operational for good. Then, in their new capacity, persons have the ability and choice to resist the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, or to allow themselves to be drawn. Thus the

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<sup>60</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology Volume One: God, Authority, & Salvation* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 165.

<sup>61</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 217, emphasis original.

<sup>62</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics Vol.3*, 279-80.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. John 3:16-18; Acts 2:38; 16:31; 17:30; Romans 10:9.

<sup>64</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics Vol.3*, 280.

<sup>65</sup> Arminius, *The Works Vol. II*, 700.

<sup>66</sup> Bangs, *Arminius*, 216.

human 'work' consists in yielding to the work of God's Holy Spirit, and co-operating with Him as He enables.

Describing God's grace in regeneration, Arminius says

this grace is simply and absolutely necessary for the illumination of the mind, the due ordering of the affections, and the inclination of the will to that which is good: It is this grace which operates on the mind, the affections, and the will; which infuses good thoughts into the mind, inspires good desires into the affections, and bends the will to carry into execution good thoughts and good desires. This grace [*praevenit*] goes before, accompanies, and follows: it excites, assists, operates that we will, and co-operates lest we will in vain.<sup>67</sup>

Having described God's activity in regeneration/conversion, what role does the human subject play? Bangs says, 'The part man plays in his salvation is believing. Evangelical belief is the free choice to receive offered grace, which offered grace makes the free choice possible.' Bangs continues, 'In all of this man does nothing apart from grace: he earns nothing; he contributes nothing; but he chooses freely, and it is a choice which he can refuse to make, for grace is not an irresistible force.'<sup>68</sup> Enabled by the prevenient and accompanying grace of God the human subject in regeneration/conversion actively participates in the event by believing. Thus, to all who believe in Jesus God gives them '...power to become children of God...' (John 1:12) But how is a person who is in bondage to sin able to simply believe?

### **The Act of Faith**

Barth asks the pertinent question, 'How can man believe? How does *homo peccator* become *capax verbi divini*? The New Testament answer is that it is the Holy Spirit who sets man free for this and for the ministry in which he is put therewith.'<sup>69</sup> The first act of freedom, the first truly free human act, is one of loving response to Christ, a response of faith.<sup>70</sup> Faith is a human response to God's grace consisting of gratitude and trust toward God based on God's trinitarian self-disclosure. Describing this response Gunton says

Faith, we might say, is the *subjective* response to God's *objectively* gracious action. It is subjective in being the response of a human subject, but not something merely subjective, for it is a response that is itself also an act of God in being brought about by the Spirit. Both the objective and subjective dimension of the one act take place through Christ and in the Spirit. There is thus a single divine act which has both objective and subjective dimensions by virtue of the fact that it is the work of God the Father through Christ and the Spirit which takes shape in a human response.<sup>71</sup>

God's atoning work in Christ and His loving self-disclosure to the human subject are objective, and His enabling of the human response as well as the human response itself are subjective. The human response of faith is not something humanly possible apart from divine prevenient, enabling and accompanying grace, but neither is this response offered by the Holy Spirit

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<sup>67</sup> Arminius, *The Works Vol. II*, 700.

<sup>68</sup> Bangs, *Arminius*, 216.

<sup>69</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 456.

<sup>70</sup> Calvin describes human faith as '...a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.' *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ed. John T. McNeill & trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.ii.7.

<sup>71</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 144-5, emphasis original.

without human cooperation. This response of faith, this act of love, is concurrently Spirit-enabled and authentically human. Barth explains,

But the work of the Holy Spirit consists in the liberation of man for his own act and therefore for the spontaneous human love whose littleness and frailty are his own responsibility and not that of the Holy Spirit. Christian love as a human act corresponds to the love of God but is also to be distinguished from it. It is an act in which man is at work, not as God's puppet, but with his own heart and soul and strength, as an independent subject who encounters and replies to God and is responsible to Him as His partner.<sup>72</sup>

Thus the act of faith, central to regeneration/conversion, is a work of God in which the human actively participates. It is difficult to further penetrate the mystery of this synergism.<sup>73</sup>

This description of Spirit-enabled human faith as a trusting and giving of oneself to God would be incomplete without mentioning it is simultaneously a giving of oneself to the world for which Christ gave Himself. Braaten states that faith in the New Testament sense '...includes a double movement of conversion, first to the Lord and then to the world which he loved.'<sup>74</sup> It is a double movement not in the sense that it is two separate movements, for giving oneself to follow Christ necessarily means following Him in His mission to the world. In joining God's family a person is also joining the family business – to seek and save the lost. Faith is a double movement in that as persons give themselves to God they realise they are also giving themselves to the object of His affection, the world.

Returning to regeneration/conversion, if the nature of human response to God determines whether a person is regenerated or not, then how is this act of faith not meritorious? In other words, how does this account preserve salvation by grace and avoid being guilty of Pelagianism?

### **Human Participation and Salvation by Grace Alone**

In a short essay by C. Stephen Evans entitled 'Salvation, Sin, and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard' he describes how active human participation in regeneration/conversion is not meritorious and does not contradict salvation by grace.<sup>75</sup> Evans believes that Kierkegaard came up with a viable solution to this question.<sup>76</sup> He begins by separating the two related questions, arguing that the question of merit is a different issue to the question of free, subjective participation on the part of the individual. 'It is crucial that at some point in the process of salvation, the individual have some role to play that is due to free choice,' he says, 'but it is not necessary to see this role as giving the individual any merit.'<sup>77</sup>

Evans distinguishes between human guilt-consciousness and sin-consciousness. The former is a natural human ability deriving from the common grace given to all humanity and is related to an awareness of wrongdoing, whereas the latter is a specific gift of particular grace. Interpreting Kierkegaard, Evans says, 'The one thing a person can do for his or her own salvation is to recognize his or her own sinfulness. Strictly speaking, the person cannot even do

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<sup>72</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, 785-6.

<sup>73</sup> Brunner depicts the moment of faith, the event of regeneration and conversion, as a 'mystical event' *Dogmatics Vol.3*, 284.

<sup>74</sup> Braaten, *The Flaming Centre*, 57.

<sup>75</sup> C. Stephen Evans, 'Salvation, Sin, and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard' in Clark H. Pinnock (ed.) *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), 181-90.

<sup>76</sup> Evans draws particularly on Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments* ed. & trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

<sup>77</sup> Evans, 'Salvation, Sin, and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard', 182-3.

this without divine assistance.<sup>78</sup> Being conscious of guilt does not require special divine revelation but sin-consciousness can only be achieved by specific divine revelation, for only in the presence of God is a person awakened to sin. It is at this point of recognising one's sinfulness in the gracious presence of holy God that a person freely participates in their own regeneration/conversion. Evans explicates his argument in six steps.

First, faith is a gift from God offered to human beings. Second, humans can only accept the gift when the requisite sin-consciousness is present in that individual. A person only receives the gift of faith and believes when they are aware of their own sin and consequently their need to believe. Third, humans cannot develop sin-consciousness by themselves because, fourth, sin-consciousness is only possible in the presence of God's self-revelation. Fifth, this true self-understanding that God offers is one that the human subject is free to accept or reject, for '...my sinfulness is still something I must freely recognize.'<sup>79</sup> It is here that Evans brings in human agency, arguing that consciousness of one's own sin is a gift that God offers in revelation but one that can be accepted or rejected. This is the decisive way in which a person participates in their own regeneration/conversion. Sixth, when a person accepts the gift of sin-consciousness they both receive the proffered gift of faith and repent, turning from idols to serve the true and living God. That so many reject God's gracious offer is part of the mysterious and surd-like nature of sin, and with it evil. Speaking of the latter Kenneth Surin rightly comments that it is fundamentally mysterious, confounding the human mind and defying the application of rational principles.<sup>80</sup>

In the sixth and final step Evans argues that the acceptance of this sin-consciousness is not meritorious for the individual. In accepting sin-consciousness a person recognises that they have fallen short and so there is nothing within them that deserves or merits salvation. He says, 'The one thing people can do toward their own salvation is to recognize their own inability to do anything toward their own salvation.'<sup>81</sup> Only by the sinner freely recognising their total lack or merit before God and their need of divine mercy, can he/she be in a position to receive the faith offered by God, and through faith, salvation. Accepting the gift of sin-consciousness does not constitute salvation by works, since 'There is no merit in accepting a gift, especially if even the ability to accept the gift is itself a gift.'<sup>82</sup> This is particularly true when the gift is recognition of one's own sinfulness and unworthiness of the gift. I believe this insight is crucial not only for regeneration but also for sanctification, for both entry into and growth in the Christian life. Drawing on Kierkegaard I believe Evans, combining both apophatic and cataphatic theology, successfully shows that the human subject has a crucial role to play in their own regeneration/conversion but one which completely preserves salvation by grace through faith.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I have described a synergistic account of God's resistible grace and human participation in regeneration/conversion that is in accord with God's self-revelation as recorded in Scripture and is thus theologically faithful. Regeneration/conversion is uniquely an act of God and God desires that all are regenerated but will not so act without willing human cooperation. In God's prevenient and accompanying grace He overcomes human addiction to sin and enables persons to freely respond to and thus cooperate with His saving grace. The

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<sup>78</sup> Evans, 'Salvation, Sin, and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard', 183.

<sup>79</sup> Evans, 'Salvation, Sin, and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard', 184.

<sup>80</sup> Kenneth Surin, *The Turnings of Darkness and Light: Essays in Philosophical and Systematic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 78.

<sup>81</sup> Evans, 'Salvation, Sin, and Human Freedom in Kierkegaard', 184.

<sup>82</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing A Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 83.

essence of this human response is faith, which is simultaneously a gracious trinitarian gift. In God's providence He chooses to sometimes act unilaterally and at other times makes His own actions contingent upon human actions; regeneration/conversion is an example of the latter. God desires that humans freely receive His saving grace and so has given to these image-bearing creatures a critical determination in this regard. God alone can regenerate/convert a person, but God will not do so without their willing participation. When humans do so participate this is by no means *autosoteria* or salvation by works, because the crucial human 'contribution' is to recognize his/her total sinfulness and unworthiness, and this too cannot be done without divine assistance. By this recognition the person is ready and made ready to receive and exercise the gift of faith which is the inaugural act of new birth. Consequently, God alone receives the glory for a person's salvation and God's love toward all, including those who reject Him, can be genuinely and confidently pronounced. Why so many respond to the gospel and so many do not remains a mystery, but this mystery is the mystery of human sin and is not attributable to the will of God, which has been revealed once and for all in Jesus Christ, whose cross is a permanent reminder that God's love is for all.<sup>83</sup> Finally, the fact that God's prevenient grace that enables and causes belief in Christ is offered through the Church's communication of the gospel is of immense missiological importance. As the Church carries out her missionary task she can be confident not only that Christ has died for all, but also that there is inherent power in gospel proclamation and demonstration, for it is *through* the Church's mission that God makes His grace available and people are enabled to repent and believe, and thus experience regeneration/conversion.

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<sup>83</sup> 1 Tim. 2.5-6; Heb. 10.10; 1 Jn 2.2.