

In the television program “Extreme Home Makeover,” old, broken-down houses are refurbished while their owners are away. When the homeowners return, they are shocked and thrilled to see that their house has been completely transformed. They enthusiastically jump up and down with excitement at what they see. One woman shouted over and over again, “it’s been transformed! it’s been transformed!” In this chapter we are going to see something even more exciting – how we are transformed by the Holy Spirit.

The “T” stands for “**Transformed by the Holy Spirit**” (Traditionally **Irresistible Grace**). Once the atonement has been accomplished by Christ on the cross, how is it to be applied to believers? By the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enables believers to understand spiritual things and begin to live in harmony with God.

The apostle Paul touches on this point: “The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Paul teaches that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts: “God’s love has poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5).

The Holy Spirit replaces our rebellious, stony hearts with warm, receptive hearts (Ezek. 36:26). The Holy Spirit opens our hearts to receive the things of God (Acts 16:14), gives us the gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-10), and removes our spiritual blindness (John 9:35-41). The Holy Spirit does all of these things to apply the atonement to our lives.

The idea that the atonement is merely accomplished by Christ but has to be applied by human beings through their own faith is incorrect. It is not true that Jesus only purchased our redemption on the cross while we supply the faith, so that we work together with Jesus to accomplish our salvation. Becoming a believer is not a cooperative effort. Regeneration (being “born again”) is not a result of placing our faith in Jesus; rather, it precedes faith. We are “born anew” by the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8), and only then are we able to believe! Salvation is entirely God’s gracious work.

In his book *Grace Unknown*, R.C. Sproul says that God did not merely provide potential salvation (offering salvation through the atoning work of Jesus) but actual salvation (because the Holy Spirit empowers us to believe). “The issue is this: Was God’s purpose to make salvation for all possible, or to make salvation for the elect certain? The ultimate aim of God’s plan of redemption was to redeem his elect. To accomplish this end he ordained the means. One was the atonement made by his Son. Another was the Holy Spirit’s application of this atonement to the elect. God provides for his elect all that is necessary for their salvation, including the gift of faith. Once we grasp the doctrine of total depravity (humanity’s total fall), we know that human beings will not incline themselves to faith in the atoning works of Christ. If God does not supply the means of appropriating the atonement’s benefits, namely faith, then the potential redemption of all would result in the actual redemption of none (p. 174) What the unregenerate person desperately needs in order to come to faith is regeneration. This is the necessary grace. Unless God changes the disposition of my sinful heart, I will never choose to cooperate with grace or embrace Christ in faith Saving grace does not offer liberation, it liberates. Saving grace does not merely offer regeneration, it regenerates. This is what makes grace so gracious: God ... does for us what we cannot do for ourselves (p. 188).”

Some characterize this as a violation of the human will. They see God as dragging people into heaven against their will. God does not violate our will. He is more like a suitor who draws forth the

love of another than a boor who forces himself on someone. God woos us and draws us to will what he wills – to desire what he desires.

Many people have experienced this truth in their lives. They fought God, but God kept after them until they finally said yes. One of the prime examples of this work of the Spirit is British author and professor C.S. Lewis. He kept holding God off, until finally one night he could resist no longer. In his book *Surprised by Joy* Lewis writes that he “knelt and prayed: perhaps that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.” It was not a big, emotional thing; it was simply irresistible. Lewis later used a phrase from the poet Francis Thompson, describing God as the “hound of heaven.” God going after his people is like a hound on the trail of a fox. God kept pursuing Lewis until God caught him. Lewis said, “I was never so happy as to be caught.”

This whole issue is not new. Let’s take a short excursion into church history to see that the misunderstandings have been dealt with before.

In the fifth century A.D. a man named Pelagius began teaching that people were born good (that is, without a sinful nature and not prone to sin). He taught that human beings had not fallen into sin and, therefore, had the ability to choose either good or evil. As a result, there was no need for the transforming work of the Holy Spirit to change hearts.

This teaching, which became known as Pelagianism, was studied in the light of the Bible and rejected by the church at the Synod of Carthage in A.D. 418, again at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431, and again at the Synod of Orange in A.D. 529.

Eleven centuries later, in the sixteenth century A.D., a similar teaching reappeared through the teachings of a Dutch theologian named Arminius and his followers. Known as Arminianism, it was also dubbed semi-Pelagianism because it taught that humankind has partially fallen rather than not fallen at all. Rather than teaching that people were born completely good (as Pelagius did), it held that people have some good qualities. The end result, however, is the same for both Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. Both maintain that people are still able to choose Christ without the help of the Holy Spirit. Salvation becomes a cooperative effort – God redeems and humanity believes.

This teaching was found to be contrary to Scripture and rejected at the Synod of Dort in A.D. 1618-1619. The statements of this synod, called the Canons of Dort, are summarized by the acronym F.A.I.T.H. (a.k.a. T.U.L.I.P.).