

THE
PROBLEM
OF
ETERNITY

FOR ROGER OLSON

WHY IRRESISTIBLE GRACE IS NOT COERCION—
AND WHY HEAVEN ITSELF REFUTES THE OBJECTION

The Problem of Eternity for Roger Olson

In Olson's view, love *may* change the will of its object only insofar as that change remains willing on the part of the one loved—who must not merely initially consent to the change but must continually consent to it. This is fraught with difficulty and inherent contradiction, for the following reasons. I will move from the lesser to the greater here.

I. No One “Chooses” to Fall in Love—the Attraction Is Evoked, Not Willed

The initial attraction—the first seeing of another as desirable—is not self-generated. It is evoked by something in or about the object, or it does not arise at all. No one decides, by an act of bare will, whom they will first find desirable. They are drawn by another's physical qualities, character, presence, or they are not drawn at all.

This is precisely where the unbeliever's condition becomes the whole question. Scripture says of the natural man that he sees in Christ “no beauty that we should desire Him” (Isa. 53:2). He perceives no merit in the evidence of Christ's existence or resurrection, feels no prior affection for the things of God. This is why the person and work of the Holy Spirit is essential in bringing any to saving-faith. If it were not so, there would be no need for His work, nor the Father's “drawing,” nor prayer for the lost.

Who or what is the agent that causes—that creates—this attraction to Christ, this new desire for Him, in one who by their sinful nature has none?

The answer, according to Jesus, is crystal clear: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44, emphasized again by Him in verse 65, signalling its importance in His mind). So the question presses with full force:

- Why is this drawing effectual in only some unregenerate sinners—no less filthy, ruined, or unworthy than any other—and not in most others? (Jesus said the road to destruction is broad with many on it, and the road to life narrow with comparatively few—Matt. 7:13.)
- Every road of opinion on this matter finally leads to this one highly significant, all-too-often overlooked, yet essential question: why did you see in the person

and work of Christ such beauty and immeasurable worth that you ran to Him, while others see nothing of value at all?

The Prevenient-Grace Evasion

Olson's view has no ultimate answer outside of self. He and all Arminians/synergists like him would protest, "No—we affirm that grace had to precede our choice and bring conviction, illumination, and the very ability to choose." This is the classic Wesleyan idea of *Prevenient Grace*—"grace coming before faith." It seems to give due credit to God and His grace in this drawing. But it grants grace real *enabling* power while stopping short of conceding it *effectual* power—the power to actually secure the "Yes" rather than merely make it possible. And for that reason, it answers nothing to the point; it merely pushes the question back one step while the same question remains: **why did you say "Yes" to that prior act of God, while your neighbour—who you claim received the very same grace—said "No"?**

However the synergist minimizes it, the bottom line is unmoved: he insists that, despite everything God did and does, it is *he himself* who ultimately chose to see, appreciate, desire, and embrace Christ. By this, the *Sola* of *Sola Gratia*—"grace alone"—is effectively denied. The formula is no longer **saving faith = grace + 0**, but **grace + "x" from self**. The moment anything is added to grace, the "Sola" is gone. There is no logical, theological, or scriptural way around this.

"Persuasive" Grace Is Either Effectual or Not Persuasive at All

The Wesleyan's deepest difficulty lies hidden in his own vocabulary. He calls prevenient grace *persuasive* yet *resistible*. But these cannot stand together, for **persuasion is defined by its effect**. To "persuade" is not merely to attempt to move a mind—it is to succeed in moving it. We never say, "I persuaded him, but he was wholly unmoved"; the sentence contradicts itself. An appeal that fails to move is not persuasion—it is an unsuccessful appeal. In every practical scenario, "persuaded" requires an actual change in the opinion, attitude, or direction of the one persuaded. Where there is no change, no persuasion occurred.

But here the Wesleyan's retreat into "merely influenced, not persuaded" collapses on closer inspection, for *influence* is not a weaker, safer category than persuasion—it makes precisely the same admission. Person A is set on a course; Person B intervenes; Person A changes course in response. A real choice was made—but why? To the

extent B's intervention explains the change, then B, not A, is the cause of the outcome. If A would have changed course apart from B, then B did not influence A at all; the intervention merely coincided with a self-generated decision—but was ultimately irrelevant. There is no third category in which B's grace genuinely affects the result while A retains ultimate credit. Either the intervention of B explains the change, and the intervener is owed the credit, or it does not, and there was no real influence.

A Glaring Inconsistency / Contradiction

This is precisely the confession of the church's beloved hymn "Amazing Grace," sung without dissent by Calvinist and Arminian alike: "*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.*" The verb is *taught*, not *invited*, not *offered*—and the subject of that verb, the one to whom the entire result is credited, is grace, not the convert! Newton does not sing, "Grace appealed to my heart, and I, of my own resolve, chose to fear"; he sings that grace itself taught it, and that grace itself relieved it. By the very logic just established, this is a confession of effectual, credit-bearing causation—exactly the category the Wesleyan denies in doctrine the moment he closes the hymnal and testifies or preaches. And herein lies the tragic irony: every Arminian congregation that sings this hymn is, in that moment, testifying in the grammar of monergism—crediting the result entirely to grace as agent, not to the will as co-author. To then return, unwittingly perhaps, to preach, defend, and testify in the next breath that this same grace was merely offered, yet-resistible and could have gone unheeded, is to deny the very truth they just passionately affirmed in song! The hymn knows what the Wesleyan/Arminian doctrine denies. Is this a mere "blessed inconsistency"? Or is it an open, contradiction and denial of the truth just affirmed in song?

Arminian Objection:

The Arminian may object,

"Grace really did teach my heart. I simply remained free either to accept or reject – and make appropriate choices regarding what grace taught."

But that needed distinction for their view cannot survive Christ's own words. Here is why.

➤ **Jesus Himself tells us what it means to be taught by God:**

“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)

Notice carefully what Christ does *not* say. He does not say,
“Everyone who hears and learns *might* come.”

Nor,
“*Some* who hear and learn come.”

Rather, *everyone* who has heard *and learned* from the Father *comes*.

It is clear in Jesus’ mind – therefore, the only context which matters – is that the teaching itself *accomplishes* the coming. This is not the teaching of a fallible human instructor whose students may agree or disagree. It is the teaching of God Himself.

Thus, when Newton wrote, “T’was grace that *taught* my heart to fear,” he -perhaps unknowingly? Or perhaps with full understanding, expressed precisely what Christ Himself said / taught.

➤ God’s teaching does not merely inform. It transforms.

✚ **John 6:45, follows verses 37 and 44 for this very reason. And for this reason, Jesus emphasized the same truth yet again in vs 65. So, four times in the same chapter, Jesus said, re-stated and re-emphasized the one truth that all synergism rages against: All of those whom God “draws/teaches” DO come to Christ**

“Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian?”

Scripture gives us a vivid real-life example of this exact difference—between an appeal that only informs and one that actually persuades: Paul on trial before Roman officials, and a king hearing the gospel face to face from the Apostle Paul himself.

King Agrippa listened to Paul’s testimony about Christ. He was clearly informed by it. But when Paul pressed him to believe, Agrippa’s reply was, “Do you think that in such a short time you can *persuade* me to be a Christian?” (Acts 26:28, NIV).

Notice what Agrippa is really saying. He is not denying that Paul's words provided information he did not have previously, or he would never have replied at all. He was at this point clearly informed—yet still unmoved, in that the information supplied by Paul did not succeed in moving the king's will. Agrippa refuses to call this “persuasion,” because he *knows* that word means something stronger: an actual change of mind and life, not just a stirred conscience. He is, in effect, drawing the very line this essay has drawn—between being informed and being truly “drawn”—hence, won.

Agrippa walked away unconverted. He was informed about the truth, but he was never persuaded. He did not believe. He was not saved. But in the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ the truth of sovereign grace, also known as monergism, is absolutely affirmed *as* causational. To affirm this in song as “worship” to God and before others, then turn and deny its truth, is to tread on very dangerous ground spiritually. Jesus said our worship to/of God must be “in spirit and truth.” So, which is it? Grace truly “taught”—hence, influenced/persuaded us to “fear” – as Jesus explicitly taught? And *because it did*, we then ran to the solution for that fear because of what grace did? Or are we ourselves to be credited – in whole or in part - with both the fearing and the running to Christ? You see, it cannot be both—not according to Scripture! It is either “Sola Gratia”—grace alone—or it is grace + “x” from self. Which, if true, is an open denial of the “Sola.”

- **If grace genuinely persuaded**, it effected the change—and was therefore effectual after all. The synergist has conceded sovereign, effectual grace in his own word.
- **If grace did not effect the change**, then it did not persuade—and, as just shown, it did not even influence, in any sense that credits grace with the outcome. “Persuasive prevenient grace” is an empty label predicating success and non-success of one and the same act. It is an open oxymoron and empties the vocabulary of its true power.

Olson may retreat: “By *persuasive* I mean *inviting* or *appealing*, not *effecting*—grace woos, the will decides.” But he cannot retreat to *influence* either, for it has just been shown that influence makes the identical admission persuasion does: whatever measure of credit the change owes to grace is, to that very degree, not owed to the will. If he insists the will retains ultimate credit for believing, then grace did not influence it any more than it persuaded it—it was merely present, like Paul's words to Agrippa, at a

decision the self made on its own. He has, in truth, only one word left to retreat to: *invite*, or *appeal*—terms that, unlike “persuade” and “influence,” carry no claim to having caused anything at all. This only loops him back into the very argument Section I opened on. An *invitation* is not a *persuasion*; we distinguish the two precisely because one merely *presents* and the other *prevails*!

If he abandons “persuade” for “invite,” he is back to grace that merely *offers*—which never claimed to “draw” at all, and which runs headlong into the *helkō* of John 6:44 (to drag, pull, draw—never to invite). He has no stable ground between “invite” (too weak—defeated by *helkō*) and “persuade” (too strong—it concedes effectual grace, as Agrippa himself understood). This is yet another fatal—and obvious—flaw in Wesleyan/Arminianism and its prevenient grace.

Does John 12:32 “I will draw all men to Me” Disprove all this?

John 12:32 is frequently offered as proof that Christ merely attempts to draw every individual equally. Yet the text says nothing of the sort.

Jesus does not say, “I will *try* to draw.”

Nor, “I will offer to draw Myself.”

➤ He says, “I *will* draw.”

Note: The verb “helko” remains exactly the same one employed throughout the New Testament whenever something is physically drawn, dragged, or pulled. In the only other places the verb is used, we see the following acts:

Peter draws his sword.

The disciples drag the net of fish.

The rich drag the poor into court.

In *none* of these instances does the object determine whether the drawing succeeds.

- If the word suddenly and in this sole instance means nothing more than “invite” in John 12:32, the burden of proof rests squarely upon those making that claim.

The real question, therefore, is not the force of the verb.

It is the meaning of “all.”

Compared with Christ’s own teaching throughout John 6 which we saw earlier, together with John’s wider context, “all” is best understood as all kinds of people—Jew and Gentile alike—not every individual without exception. It is therefore, a linguistic synecdoche and frankly, must be otherwise given the very meaning and usage of the verb “*helko*,” Christ has failed to achieve a thing He said He *will* do! This idea would be abhorrent to any true believer

Thus Christ’s promise remains exactly what He intended:

He will certainly draw every one the Father has given Him and they come from “every nation, tribe and tongue” as Revelation 5:9 demonstrates.

But we press the argument now to its final and greatest—nay, insurmountable—hurdle for Olson and all who share his view.

II. The Problem of Eternity

What answer does Olson have for the fact that in eternity the redeemed will have neither the inward desire nor the outward opportunity to resist or rebel against God or Christ?

If he would reply that such resistance *will* still be possible in glory, he denies the very need for glorification. “Mortality puts on immortality” speaks to the *longevity* of existence; “corruption puts on incorruption” speaks to its *type*—and that second clause is, from beginning to end, a moral description. In eternity, Satan is in the lake of fire; nothing evil or impure exists anywhere in the new heavens and the new earth; every person is glorified and stands in the actual, visible presence of God and of Christ (Rev. 21:4, 27; 22:3). From whence, then, could such a desire or temptation even arise?

The Lucifer Objection

“It arose spontaneously in Lucifer,” one might object, “so perhaps it remains possible even in eternity.” This is untenable, and it betrays a failure to grasp what the *new* heavens and earth are. Lucifer fell from a temporal probationary state, within *this* present created order—an order in which the conditions of falling still existed, and which will itself be dissolved and pass away. Lucifer was not fallen, redeemed, then glorified as the redeemed from Adam’s race are. The glorified saint is in the fully saved, redeemed, glorified, eternal, consummated state. The possibility of sin belonged to this present creation; it does not exist in the eternal state. The objection imports the conditions of the old world into the new—a significant theological error Scripture does not and will not permit.

The Symmetry That Traps the Objection

Now the vise closes. Since all the glorified will eternally love, worship, and adore the living God in Christ—**and will not be capable of any other response**—does this make them coerced? Is God then an eternal “violator” of their will?

Olson cannot answer “yes” without indicting heaven itself as the very coercion he condemns. So, he must answer “no.” But the only ground on which his “no” is available is fatal to his objection in this life:

- **If “unable to do otherwise” is coercion**—which is his premise against sovereign grace in this life—then the eternal state is also eternal coercion, and heaven is the very violation he abhors and rails against, only now on an infinite scale.
- **If “unable to do otherwise” is not coercion in glory**—because the redeemed freely and joyfully will only the good, even when there is literally no other option or possibility—then his premise was false all along, and his objection to sovereign grace collapses in this life as well.

He cannot keep both. He will reach for the obvious escape—“but they chose this in life”—yet that reply is baseless precisely here. For in this life they had a moment-by-moment, day-by-day option to choose otherwise; it is *that very option* which is totally removed in eternity. The only dodge he can resort to appeals to the one thing the eternal state abolishes.

Why the Will in Glory Does Not Drift—and Why That Vindicates Sovereign Grace

An objection could be framed thus: in glory the redeemed are not coerced because their will is freely inclined to the good—they do not *want* to do otherwise. But this merely relocates the question: **why** do they not want to do otherwise? And in an eternal state, who can say that desire might not one day change? The synergist insists that, given enough time, opportunity, and possibility of contrary choice, it so often changes in this life—so why not in eternity?

Press that question and his own theory of how love dies hands us the answer. Why does love dissipate in this life? Because the lived experience failed to match expectation; because of the pressures of work, finances, family, and weariness; because of temptation—the lure of another, the craving for the “fireworks” of something fresh; and, beneath all of it, because *persons themselves change*. Every mechanism by which love decays in this life is a contingency rooted in mutable (changing, changeable) objects within a mutable world.

- But the object of the redeemed’s love is **immutable**. Christ’s nature never changes (Heb. 13:8); in His presence is fullness of joy, and pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16:11). What is desirable, all-beautiful, and awe-inspiring in Him today will always be so. He neither grows old nor changes His personality or character.
- Hence eternity provides a total satisfaction that is full and unending, and therefore cannot decay into boredom or disinterest.
- And in the new creation there is no rival, no temptation, no weariness, no competing “better experience,” and no decay. Every condition by which love dies in this age is structurally absent in eternity.

The redeemed cannot fall in eternity because there is nothing in Christ to fall away from and nothing outside Him to fall toward. Coercion has no purchase on a will eternally satisfied by an infinite, unchanging glory—apart from whom there is nothing and no one else to entice it away.

And herein then is Olson’s view exposed for the open contradiction it is. The very principle that makes glory non-coercive in eternity **is the principle of sovereign regeneration applied in time**. Olson must accept it for heaven, or heaven itself

becomes coercion. But once he accepts it for heaven, he cannot call it “rape” when it operates at the new birth in time. Such is an open, obvious, glaringly irreconcilable oxymoron.

- **Incredibly, then, his own framework supplies the proof of the doctrine he set out to deny.**

Thus, Olson’s view—that if sovereign grace be true, it makes God a violator, coercive, or even the moral equivalent of a rapist in this life—is not diminished in eternity; it is magnified by the very same measure. The only position consistent in all aspects, both in this life and for eternity, is the truth of sovereign grace.

III. The Fatal Problem of Merit / Reward and Salvation itself

Olson et al, could reply thus, “Those in heaven are not coerced because they freely chose Christ throughout this life. God merely confirms forever what they themselves chose.”

At first glance this appears compelling. Upon examination, however, it destroys grace altogether.

Because *if* glorification is granted *because of* our choices in this life – and every Arminian / Synergist insists that choices always produce actions which result from the choice - *then* glorification is no longer a *gift of grace*.

- **It now becomes a reward. And herein then is a conclusion scripture not only does not teach, but will not tolerate as truth!**

Scripture carefully distinguishes salvation itself *from* rewards.

Paul speaks of believers receiving differing rewards (1 Cor. 3:12–15), yet every believer receives exactly the same glorification. Paul even says that if a believer obtains no reward, he will still be saved!

If glorification depends upon our persevering choices, then eternal life has become payment for those choices.

Grace has then become wages which the worker is now owed.

Yet Scripture expressly denies and therefore, forbids such reasoning:

“Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt” (Rom. 4:4)

- **Whatever ultimately distinguishes the glorified from the lost occupies the *decisive* place. If that distinguishing factor lies in man, Sola Gratia has already been surrendered.**

Nor does the argument survive the actual diversity of those whom God saves.

Some believers follow Christ for seventy years.

Others are converted shortly before death.

Some die in infancy.

Others never possess the intellectual capacity to exercise the sort of prolonged conscious choices Olson’s et al, argument requires.

Yet every one of them inherits exactly the same glorified nature.

On what basis?

Certainly not decades of faithful choosing. The infant possesses no such history. The dying thief possessed only hours. Yet both inherit precisely the same incorruptible life.

Thus the ground of glorification *cannot* ultimately be the believer’s accumulated choices.

- It must therefore be the grace of God alone.

There is another fatal difficulty.

How could a few years of *imperfect*, stumbling obedience – meaning, occasions of sin which means “to miss the mark” - possibly merit an *eternal* transformation of human nature itself? Remember, “corruption puts on incorruption” at the resurrection of the body.

James tells us,

“We all stumble in many things” (James 3:2)

And he also adds,

“Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point has become guilty of all.” (James 2:10).

- **How then shall a lifetime admittedly filled with countless failures become the basis upon which God grants an incorruptible, glorified nature forever?**

It cannot – in any way, shape or form.

Glorification is not the reward of successful human choosing.

It is the final triumph of sovereign grace.

Conclusion: The Charge Mistakes the Creator for a Creature

At its root, the “coercion” charge is a category confusion and profound error about what kind of “good” God is. A finite, mutable good in this life can be loved freely but revocably; to remove the option of leaving such a good might indeed be a kind of imposition in *that* realm. But an infinite, immutable, unchangeable, incomprehensibly holy, majestic, glorious all-satisfying good, fully seen, *cannot* coherently be refused by a perfected will. And to call *that* “coercion” is like calling it coercion that those glorified cannot freely will their own damnation after glorification. If they could, they would not be glorified, but merely on a probationary status pending possible, future glorification.

The objection does not survive contact with the doctrine of God Himself. There are, and can be, no eternal victims in eternity—only glorified worshippers.