

The *Bible & Life* **Bible Teaching Newsletter**

BIBLICAL DOCTRINE & NEW TESTAMENT ASSEMBLY LIFE

Vol. 31, No. 5

December 1, 2024

Was H. A. Ironside a Calvinist?

By David Dunlap

H.A Ironside preached his first message in the streets of southern California at the age of 14. He was called the “Boy preacher of Los Angeles.” He would go on to be a powerful preacher, a prolific author, and spiritual counselor of many. He sat on the boards of African Inland Mission, Bob Jones University, Dallas Theological Seminary and several others. He was called the leader of the fundamentalist movement and was one of the most well-known Christian leaders of his generation.

However, it is sometimes asked whether the evangelist H.A. Ironside was a Calvinist, or it is assumed that he must have been one because he held to some doctrines which are often associated with Reformed theology, like the doctrine “eternal security”. Add to this that Ironside was not afraid of using terms as the Bible uses them, and when some readers see terms like “predestination” or “election”, they assume a Calvinistic meaning.

H.A. Ironside & Calvinism

Ironside writes, for example concerning John 6:37: “You say you do not believe in election or predestination. Then you will have to tear a number of pages out of your Bible, for there are many of them that magnify God’s sovereign electing grace.”¹ If we stopped there, we might say, “Ah ha! A Calvinist after all!” But keep reading! Ironside continues:

“Nowhere in the Bible are we told that God has predetermined before man is born that he will be lost or saved, but Scripture says, ‘For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren’ (Romans 8:29). Moody was right when he used to say that, ‘The ‘whosoever wills’ are the elect, and the ‘whosoever won’t’ the non-elect.’”²

Since it is commonly known that H. A. Ironside held to the Calvinist doctrines such as assurance of salvation, total depravity, and election. And although he did sound Calvinistic at times, H.A. Ironside agreed more with non-Calvinistic teaching, rather than Calvinism on key New Testament doctrines. We would like to survey the writings of this respected evangelist, Bible teacher, and theologian.

“Nowhere in the Bible are we told that God has predetermined before man is born that he will be lost or saved... Moody was right when he used to say that, ‘The ‘whosoever wills’ are the elect, and the ‘whosoever won’ts the non-elect’.”

**H.A. Ironside
(1876-1951)**

“No one would ever come to Christ if it were not for the convicting, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit of God. Unless the Spirit of God awakens a man, unless the Spirit of God brings him see his lost condition, convicts him of the tremendous truths of Holy Scripture, no man would ever of himself turn to Christ.”

**H.A. Ironside
(1876-1951)**

Total Depravity

Dr. Ironside addresses this doctrine explicitly in his book, *Illustrations of Bible Truth* where, under the heading “Total Depravity”, he writes:

Many object to the doctrine of total depravity on the ground that all men are capable of some good even if unsaved. All of us recognize the value of decency in behavior, of a kindly spirit, of generosity in caring for the needy, and similar virtues. There may be much about him that others can admire, but he is positively unable to do the will of the Lord, because his heart is utterly estranged from God, and therefore so far as holiness is concerned, he is totally depraved. Only the new birth—regeneration by the Word and Spirit of God—can enable him to keep in line with the divine will as laid down in the Holy Scriptures. However righteous he may appear in the eyes of his fellows, because of this fatal defect all his righteousness is as filthy rags in the sight of God.”³

The Convicting Work of the Holy Spirit

While Ironside held firmly to Total Depravity, he departed from Calvinists on the doctrines of Irresistible Grace and Unconditional Election. Ironside preferred the terms “the convicting work of the Spirit of God” or “the sanctification of the Spirit” — terms that Scripture itself uses. Concerning the work of the convicting work of the Holy Spirit in the unbeliever he wrote in his commentary on 1 Peter:

“There is nothing fatalistic or arbitrary about election as taught in the Scriptures. The gospel is to be preached to all, and all who believe it may be assured that they are numbered among the elect. Through the Spirit’s sanctification—that is, His separating work, men are awakened and brought to see their need of Christ.”⁴

It is clear from Ironside’s writings that he held to the need for the inward work of the Holy Spirit in individuals, but that His divine work can also be resisted by fallen human beings. He unfolds the New Testament teaching on the convicting work of the Holy Spirit when he writes:

“First of all, no one would ever come to Christ if it were not for the convicting, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit of God. Unless the Spirit of God awakens a man, unless the Spirit of God brings him to see his lost condition, convicts him of the tremendous truths of Holy Scripture, no man would ever of himself turn to Christ. That is a very solemn fact, but it is a fact nevertheless. ... On the other hand, it is quite possible for the Spirit of God to operate in convicting power on the heart of man and yet that man do what the Jews did in Stephen’s day. It is written of them, “Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost” (Acts 7:51).

So, it is possible to be convicted by the Spirit and yet to resist the Spirit. But there must be the convicting work of the Spirit of God or no one would ever come to Christ.”⁵

Election in Christ

H. A. Ironside wrote often about the biblical doctrine of election. He stated in his book on Bible questions entitled *“What’s the Answer?”*:

“There are two things that are absolutely clear in Scripture—one is that God by His foreknowledge has predestinated all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ “to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29). Predestination is never to heaven nor yet to hell; but always to special privilege in and with Christ. All who believe in Him were chosen in Christ “before the foundation of the world.”⁶

On the doctrine of election, Ironside taught (along with the early church writers) that election is based on God’s foreknowledge of those who would believe in Christ. In his commentary on the epistle to the Ephesians he develops this thought:

“Then listen to the apostle Peter, ‘Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied’ (1 Peter 1:2). There you have exactly the same order [as in 2 Thessalonians 2:13]. God the Father foreknew us from eternity, but it was up to us whether or not we would yield to Christ. When we did yield in the obedience of faith, we took our places beneath the sprinkled blood of Jesus and our salvation was eternally assured. People try sometimes to put the whole responsibility on God and say, “If God has not chosen me, I cannot be saved.” If you will trust in Christ, you may know that God has chosen you.”⁷

Illustration of Election and Foreknowledge

“When Paul and his company were on their way to Rome, a terrific storm arose and they were casting out some cargo into the sea in order to lighten the ship... And then an angel appeared and spoke with Paul, and Paul called for the captain and said, ‘Be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man’s life among you, but only the ship’...(Acts 27:22-24) ‘Except these abide in the ship, you cannot be saved’ (v.31).” Ironside further writes, “There was God’s foreknowledge. Everyone would be brought through safely, and none would be lost. But then Paul said, ‘Except these abide in the ship, you cannot be saved.’” Had he not already told them that none should perish? Yes, that was God’s side. Then he said, “Except these abide in the ship, you cannot be saved” —that was their side (Man’s side). They were responsible to see that no one left the ship, so regarding the doctrine of election and man’s responsibility. Everyone who is saved will be in heaven because he was chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world and yet everyman who is ever saved will be there because as a poor sinner he put his trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. (–Quotation continued)

“Whosoever will, may take the water of life freely (Rev. 22:17). This is not at all a question of being allowed to take Christ as Savior. Rather, it is an earnest entreaty to do so. No man will ever be lost because God would not allow him to be saved. Jesus said, ‘You will not come to me, that you might have life’ (John 5:40).”



Bible & Life Ministries, Inc.
3116 Gulfwind Dr., Land O' Lakes, FL 34639

December 2024

INFORMATION

Bible and Life is published periodically and sent out free of charge, supported entirely by the freewill offerings of the Lord's people. Checks should be made out to "Bible and Life Ministries, Inc."

Correspondence should be sent to:

BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter
c/o David Dunlap
3116 Gulfwind Drive
Land O' Lakes, FL 34639
(813) 494-1680

e-mail
daviddunlap100@gmail.com

web site
www.bibleandlife.org

 Facebook
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bible-Life/139555992799868>

*You may say "I can't harmonize this." You do not need to do so; just believe it and go on your way rejoicing."*⁸

Conclusion – Personal Responsibility in Salvation

We conclude this survey on H.A. Ironside's thoughts on some aspects of Calvinism concerning personal responsibility from his book *What's the Answer?* Under the heading "Predestination" Ironside writes:

"It is clear from Scripture that God is not willing that any should perish but that He desires that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Therefore, the gospel preacher can declare without any kind of mental reservation the blessed fact that whosoever will, may take the water of life freely (Rev. 22:17). This is not at all a question of being allowed to take Christ as Savior. Rather, it is an earnest entreaty to do so. No man will ever be lost because God would not allow him to be saved. Jesus said, 'You will not come to me, that you might have life' " (John 5:40).⁹

Endnotes

1. H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Gospel of John* (Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, NJ, 1959), p 251-252
2. H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Gospel of John* (Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, NJ, 1959), p 252
3. H. A. Ironside, *Illustrations of Bible Truth* (Moody, Chicago, IL, 1945), p. 95
4. H. A. Ironside, *Addresses on the First Epistle of Peter* (Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, NJ, 1980), p. 14
5. H.A. Ironside, *Addresses on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, NJ, 1954), p. 40-41
6. H.A. Ironside, *What's the Answer?* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1944), p. 43
7. H.A. Ironside, *In the Heavenlies (Ephesians)* (Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, NJ, 1953), p. 30
8. H.A. Ironside, *In the Heavenlies (Ephesians)* (Loizeaux Brothers, Neptune, NJ, 1953), p. 31-32
9. H.A. Ironside, *What's the Answer?* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1944), p.44