

# “God Draws Men to Himself”

## Another Look at John 6:44 and John 12:32

J. Paul Tanner, ThM, PhD  
Oct 23, 2022

### An Introduction to the Debate

The Apostle John in his gospel account of the life of Christ records several intense and hostile conversations between the Lord Jesus and the unbelieving Jewish crowds that listened to Him. In one such situation, Jesus claimed, “I am the bread that came down out of heaven” (Jn 6:41). The reaction by the unbelieving Jews was one of skepticism, for in their minds, they knew His origin and that His father was Joseph and His mother was Mary. So, they grumbled at what they surmised was nothing more than a boastful claim by a deluded egotist. Jesus then replied,

“Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn 6:43-44).

In John’s gospel, the notion of “coming to Me” is a way of speaking of turning in faith to Jesus for salvation. We read earlier in John 5:40 where Jesus rebuked the unbelief of some Jews, saying, “you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.” Now in John 6:44, Jesus indicates that “coming to Him” must be accompanied by God’s *drawing him*. Even a casual reading of this passage suggests that such a notion says something about the sovereignty of God, and some have used this as a proof-text for individual divine election and predestination.

As though to defuse the rather weighty implications that John 6:44 insinuates, others (less inclined to a Calvinistic theology) would point to another verse that uses the same Greek word for “draw” (the Gk verb ἔλκω, *hélkō*), namely, John 12:32. This verse reads, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” The claim is made, then, that God *draws all men* to Himself, not just some men.” So, if God draws all men to Himself, then John 6:44 must not mean that God only draws some men (so they reason).

### A Logical Fallacy

To claim that John 12:32 is the key to interpreting John 6:44 results in a logical conundrum. To state on the one hand that no one can come to Christ for salvation unless the Father draws them but then to turn around and say that all people are drawn to Christ simply results in a negating of the conditional aspect of the former. Logically, you cannot have a conditional aspect of salvation on the one hand and the opposite negating it at the same time. This suggests that another interpretation is most likely.

### The Contextual Meaning of John 12:32

Just because John 6:44 and John 12:32 use the same Greek word “draw” (*hélkō*), this does not automatically mean that both verses are addressing the same issue. It is very possible that Jesus is making a different point in each case. After all, this word “draw” is also used in John 21:11, which states, “Simon Peter went up and draw the net to land, full of large fish.” Clearly, this is an entirely different context, and that makes all the difference in the world.

When we look at the context of John 12:32, we can observe that the paragraph in which this occurs immediately follows one in which we see Gentiles seeking Jesus. Notice these verses:

<sup>20</sup> Now there were some Greeks among those who were going up to worship at the feast; <sup>21</sup> these then came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida of Galilee, and *began to* ask him, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” <sup>22</sup> Philip came and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip came and told Jesus. <sup>23</sup> And Jesus answered them, saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:20-24).

The “much fruit” that Jesus spoke of in John 12:24 is obviously looking at the *spiritual fruit* of believers who would come to Him in faith, not only from among the Jews but also from among the Gentiles. This contextual emphasis upon Gentiles seeking Jesus clarifies the point of John 12:32. Jesus said, “And I, if I am lifted up [*given over to crucifixion*], will draw all men—*meaning not only Jews but Gentiles*—to Myself.” In John 12:32 Jesus is not saying something about the sanctifying work of all individuals of all nations of all time. He is simply saying that His atoning work of the cross will be for more than just believers of Israel. Rather, it will be for people of all nations. Those “Greeks” who came to Philip at the feast will also be the beneficiaries of Christ’s atoning work.

### Clarifying the Meaning of John 6:44

Although John 12:32 uses the word “draw” (ἔλκω, *hélkō*) as does John 6:44, this alone does not mean John 6:44 should be interpreted in light of John 12:32. Jesus is making a different point in John 12:32 than He does in John 6:44. The latter is about God’s sovereign work in the process of salvation. This is substantiated by Jesus’ own clarifying remark a few verses later in John 6:65: “And He was saying, ‘For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.’” Notice the difference with John 6:44. The words “unless the Father who sent Me draws him” have now been replaced with “unless it has been granted him from the Father.” God’s sovereign authority is involved! This does not necessarily mean that John 6:44 proves individual divine election. What it does teach is that an individual’s salvation does involve God’s sovereign authority in *drawing* him to Christ. A closer look at the verse following John 6:44 sheds further light as to how this works: “It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught of God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me” (John 6:45). The *drawing influence* of the Father works in conjunction with “teaching.” People hear and learn as part of the process by which the Father draws them to Christ. We could infer from this that the Holy Spirit illumines the Word of God as a person “hears and learns” which results in a *wooing* of that person unto Christ.<sup>1</sup>

The salvation process is like a two-sided coin. On one side is man’s responsibility to believe in order to be saved. The other side is God’s sovereign work in drawing one to Christ. Our theology needs to keep these two in balance. Both are true, and both work harmoniously together, the outcome being a person’s salvation.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Greek word for draw (ἔλκω, *hélkō*) is also used in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament in Song of Songs 1:4 where the bride pleads to her lover, “Draw me after you *and* let us run *together!*” The king has brought me into his chambers.” She delights in his affections and “wooing” effect upon her.