

Trampling Through The T-U-L-I-P

The pioneers of our Movement, Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell, being educated Presbyterian preachers, were well-versed in the teachings of John Calvin. As they gradually separated from their Presbyterian and Baptist influence, their efforts were given great thrust by Walter Scott. Scott let his hearers know that their salvation or damnation did not depend upon the unalterable choice of God but that God offered salvation through the Gospel which they could choose to accept or reject. Believers were more readily drawn to a God who respected choices instead of predetermined individuals.

John Calvin developed a system of doctrine based upon the sovereignty of God through which he totally controlled the destiny of each individual, unaffected by any choice of the individual. His teachings have been epitomized by the acronym T-U-L-I-P which I will characterize briefly as follows:

Total depravity. Because of the sin of Adam, no person can make a move toward God but can only respond to the irresistible initiative of God to save him.

Unconditional election. In exercising his total sovereignty over men, he chose all who would be saved which number cannot be increased or diminished. That election was not based on any merit or lack of it that God foresaw in the chosen individuals.

Limited atonement. Instead of Jesus dying for all persons, he died to save only the chosen individuals predestined to salvation. Thus he saved them rather than just giving them the choice of accepting salvation.

Irresistible grace. Since man can not choose to accept grace, it is an irresistible gift bestowed upon those chosen by God. Since it is by God's own volition, no elect person will resist the Holy Spirit so as to be lost.

Perseverance of the saints. Those individuals God foreknew and chose before the beginning of the world for whom Christ died particularly, he has called, justified, and glorified. They have been kept from the possibility of falling away from God's grace.

My analysis probably does not meet Calvin's approval, if he is aware of our doings on earth now. If he is in torment, it may add to his misery. If he is in heaven, it does not bother him, for no one on earth can detract from one's eternal bliss. ☺

Some things I am hearing from some disciples these days are disturbing to me. There seems to be a trend toward trust in tenets of Calvinism mixed with determinism and perceived through subjectivity. Different teachers emphasize different aspects without promoting all points of Calvin's theology. They sort of "tiptoe through the TULIP" by modifying it. However, its doctrines can hardly be accepted selectively for logically all the tenets come packaged together.

If each person at birth inherits the guilt of Adam, being totally corrupted and alienated from God, then he has no power to reach out to God and no inclination to do so since he is totally depraved of all good impulses. The only possibility (he has no hope) for acceptance by God must lie in God's volition rather than his own choice. No other man can help him. Only God can change his state.

This assumes that God is totally sovereign over man so that any change for good must be initiated by God. Since the totally depraved cannot do good on his own volition, the will of God must prevail over him, even as it does over all the universe. So, before the world began, God predetermined to give immortality to certain persons while leaving the majority to perish. This choice was not based upon the goodness or lack of goodness which God foresaw in the elected ones but upon the arbitrary choice of God. So the reasoning goes.

Further, redemption of the elect would be through the atonement of Jesus, but it would be an atonement limited to those particular persons predestined to receive God's grace. No individual could lay claim on this gift of immortality, but neither could any individual resist the sovereign will of God. So whom

God chose to save, he saves---rather has already saved. Neither man nor Satan can over-power God to snatch his elect from him. Even if the person is tempted and sins, he is kept from the possibility of falling away from God's grace because he was saved by God's choice rather than his own. According to explanations, if a person who was thought to have been of the elect denies God, it only reveals that he was never one of them.

Cause and Effect

This redundant re-statement is intended to emphasize the cause-and-effect sequence which ties all the constituent elements of TULIP together.

In the last few decades there has been a refreshing reemphasis given to the grace and love of God. While it has given greater assurance to believers, it has also brought long-discussed questions into consideration again. It is my aim here to touch on over-riding principles relating to the subject. The TULIP teachings have many proof-texts; so it is not my intention to array proof-texts opposite them. You know the Scriptures well enough, I trust, to be able to discuss principles without such snippets of Scripture.

Grace by its very definition is a gift. A gift is neither an award for merit nor a payment for works achieved. God's gift of salvation is either given to all universally or it is limited to those who accept it. It is either determined by God's sovereign choice or by the recipient's choice to accept God's offered gift. It is conditional, based upon man's acceptance as Paul explained to Ephesian disciples who had received it: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8). Yet, this very text is twisted to "prove" that it is imposed by sovereign action without man's volition.

We in our congregations generally, as well as those in some other denominations, have taught that the grace is given to persons who believe strongly enough to initiate repentance from their sins and to be baptized for the remitting of those sins in application of Jesus' meritorious atonement. Thus the individual accepts the grace without any thought of meritorious works, legal qualifications, or adding any element to the gift. Actions of acceptance are considered as no more meritorious than cashing a gift check would be. However, most of those in Protestant groups have cried out against baptism being a condition to the receiving of the gift. They contend that baptism is a work, an action, something that man does in contradiction to Paul's declaration that it is not of works.

Faith and Repentance

The debate cannot logically stop there, though too often it does. If we rule out any conditional action such as baptism, then we would also have to rule out believing and repenting. Believing and repenting are both actions/works of man! How can that conclusion be avoided? Many try to evade that dilemma by claiming that belief and repentance are also gifts of God. Thus they retreat into the refuge of TULIP to the total sovereignty of God over the will of man, though they may not be ready to accept all that is logically involved in it. Supposedly, then, God give the elect both faith and repentance.

Since by inherited depravity a person has no standing to plead his case before the Court of Justice and Mercy, he can take no step toward God. So salvation of an individual was determined by God's specific choice before the world began; he initiates the saving action which the person cannot resist; he gives regenerating faith; and then rules the individual's conduct through his Spirit so that he cannot choose to sin so as to lose that salvation. That is irresistible grace! That is determinism also.

Determinism is defined as "a doctrine that acts of the will, occurrences in nature, or social or psychological phenomena are determined by antecedent causes; a belief in predestination." It is a cause-and-effect, stimulus-and-response philosophy that denies human choice. What we have thought to be our choices were actually reactions to such forces as learning and experience. Sociologists excuse us from accountability for antisocial conduct and moral irresponsibility on that ground. This concept requires that there is really no such thing as morality and immorality, for conduct of individuals is determined by antecedent causes. And

for these believers, the antecedent cause is thought to be God who, in total sovereignty, before the world was made, determined who would be his elect and who would be damned. Then he initiated the cause-effect sequence to accomplish it. Honestly, can you believe that?

Some of us have a difficult time harmonizing the concept of a good, loving, impartial God with the belief that he gave man the power of choice, knowing that most would choose not to serve him and would be damned. That approach poses enough problems, but there is no way to harmonize the love and morality of God with the thought that he determined before the world began to save only certain individuals while determining the damnation of the majority of those to be born. The concept of election by a totally sovereign God portrays deity who is less endearing than the impartial, deterministic laws of physics..

It would mean that the only ones who can praise him for his love are those who feel that they are the elect. That fosters an elitist attitude enabling selfish delight in being God's favored while the majority are not, even though their lives may be equally commendable. How can we tell each individual, "God loves you; he knows you, and he has a plan for your life," if that person must depend upon God's volition to apply Jesus' atonement, and he has already determined the damnation of the person? "God loves you – but you must wait until he chooses to give you faith and repentance which he may not have chosen to do!"

In exploring new lands where the gospel has not gone, no one has reported finding believers in Christ. Why? Simply because faith comes through receiving the evidences relating to Christ. If God gives faith to those who call upon him, that becomes contradictory. How could a person call without having faith enough to cause him to call?

Would not the grief of parents be unbearable for the infant who died without assurance that it was of the elect? Obviously, God does not choose to give faith to a new-born. Many who have believed in inherited sin have professed faith for the infant while having it baptized. Thus the belief in baptismal regeneration and a sacramental working through baptism were developed.

Assurance of Salvation

I have attended revival meetings where convicted persons went to "the altar," commonly called the "mourner's bench" to plead with God to save them. Their faith was already evident. How would they know they were lost? How would they know when they were saved? Those emotionally inclined would *feel* it! Those less emotionally inclined and more left brained had great difficulty in receiving such evidence. Some, after numerous attempts, gave up. Thus, subjective feelings, rather than complying with Biblical instructions, became the basis of confidence in one's salvation. How else could the *elect* be determined? By their works? Cannot an unbeliever do good works? Although inspired writers have never indicated that feelings can be trusted as evidence of forgiveness by God, a great segment of believers depend upon them for their assurance.

If those seekers could not have faith until God gave it to them, and if they were saved by faith with no action on their part, they were already saved when they went to the altar seeking salvation. If regeneration is given when faith is given, they were already sons of God and did not know it! How fickle the feelings!

Some have chided those who believe some accepting action is required of the individual by saying we cannot have any feeling of security. There is much more assurance in following clear instructions than in trusting in emotions. Maybe you trust yours, but you know others who feel they are saved whom you are sure are not saved! Right?

Suppose that you and I were together and you sinned against me. Later, as you lie in your bed, you regret what you did to me. At the same time I am in bed thinking about the incident. In feelings of love, I forgive you from my heart. Do you feel it? Certainly not. Forgiveness is in the heart of the one who forgives and is only felt in the heart of the forgiven when they learn about it. The good emotion is not the

evidence but is the result of the evidence. Yet much of the assurance many sincere people are depending upon is nothing more than subjective feelings based upon wishful thinking.

In Romans 8-11 and in his Ephesian letter Paul has much to say about predestination, foreknowledge of God, and God's choices (election) of those to be his people. The teachings of Jesus and inspired writers, however, are filled with reminders that each individual must hear God's message, believe it, respond to it in order to accept salvation, and continue to respond to it in order to remain in the state of sanctification. These two basic concepts presented by Paul are true. It is not for us to choose either predestination or freedom of will. We must seek to understand the harmony of them.

With this purpose in mind, let us look at the text and its setting (Ephesians 2:8) again: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not of works, lest any man should boast." How had the Ephesian disciples been saved? Please read Chapters 1-3 for elaboration on the points made here. God had chosen them before the foundation of the world (age), not individually for salvation, but that Jew and Gentile would be brought into one body. It was "the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ." They had "heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it..."

Apollos had made the first converts there, knowing only the baptism of John. On his arrival, Paul learned that they had not received that guarantee of the Spirit. So they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus and then received the Holy Spirit when Paul laid his hands on them. Thus they had received the grace of God.

In later years Paul reviewed his initial work in Ephesus, "...how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). God had granted access to both Jew and Greek through repentance toward God and belief in Jesus. The confessing and divulging of their practices resulted from Paul's teaching and miracles there which brought fear to Jew and Greek (Acts 19:17f). These activities were involved in their being chosen of God in Christ (Eph. 1:4).

Whatever Paul taught in *Romans* about election and predestination must not be interpreted to conflict with what he supervised and taught among the Ephesians. God exercised his sovereignty in choosing Jacob instead of Esau and Israel over other nations in working his plan to bring Jew and Gentile into one body in Christ, but this does not mean that he chose Jacob and the Jewish nation for salvation while rejecting all others. The dispensation of his grace was not arbitrary to individuals but was accomplished and made known to all through his predetermined plan.

There is no indication that God gave a gift of saving faith to predetermined individuals and then gave the Spirit to control their lives thereafter. The message of the gospel to bring Jew and Gentile into Christ came first. This is taught both in *Romans* and *Ephesians*. The favorable hearing of it produced faith, yea, even fear. Effective faith is activated conviction – living faith, not dead, inert belief.

Even though we might conjecture that God, before the world began, knew and foreordained which mosquito would fly in as I opened the door, that stretches credibility beyond limits gained from the Bible. God designed natural laws by which he operates the universe. We grant that he has in instances suspended or revised specific applications. Those irregularities or variations we call miracles. If our lives are guided each moment by his unchangeable will, then natural laws do not apply to humans. In speaking of man's successes and failures, Solomon did not attribute them all to the predetermination of God's sovereignty, but he explains that "time and chance happen to them all" (Ecc. 9:11f). So there are coincidental factors that work in our lives..

Can a human change the will of God? If not, then stop praying! If not, then stop evangelizing! If not, why seek medical aid! If not, you may abandon all safety cautions! If not, then forget about the definitions of right and wrong conduct. If not, then give no attention to the exhortations and the warnings written in the epistles promoting right conduct! If man cannot change his will, since God is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9), none will!

When God saves someone, can subsequent sins bring his fall? If he falls, is that proof that he was never saved? That whole system of teaching was still-born in Adam and Eve! They were made in God's own image by his own choosing. Were they sinners before eating of the tree? If so, that action did not bring sin into the world for it would have been here already. Their violation in Eden brought expulsion and death. Satan could not snatch them from God's hand, but they were enticed to leave God on their own volition.

Since it is undeniable that Adam and Eve sinned and brought death, was that because they were not really saved to begin with? Or is not that theory fatally flawed?

Yes, God is sovereign over the universe. Yet angels sinned. This could occur only because God gave them freedom of choice and then withheld his forceful dominion over their wills. Evidently, Satan is a fallen angel permitted to operate, not through the inferior power of God, but by the sufferance of God. And man is given a will and power to choose even to work contrary to the desires of God. Is man stronger than God? God has restrained his sovereignty over man's will, thus glorifying man in his likeness. The overpowering will of God could have made man as responsive and as amoral as a robot. God's self-limitation gave liberty to angels and to man. []