

Dispensationalism and TULIP? – Total Depravity

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Introduction

In this series of posts I will try to answer the question as to whether Dispensational Theology (DT) can be assimilated with TULIP. It is important to note that the definitions of the 5 points I have in mind are *those associated with the classic Confessions of Reformed theology and reproduced in the standard works*. I have decided I shall limit my Reformed sources to the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689, the Westminster Confession, the Canons of Dordt, and one or two authoritative voices like John Murray, R. C. Sproul, the book by Steele and Thomas, etc. I shall avail myself of the help of [“Scriptures On The Doctrines of Grace”](#) from [Monergism](#).

I shall be looking at the passages used through the **Grid of Category Formulations** as follows:

C1 = doctrinal formulation via a straightforward quotation of Scripture (e.g. special creation)

C2 = a strong inference from the witness of several C1 passages (e.g. the Trinity)

C3 = a possible inference based on the text of scripture (e.g. the pre-trib rapture)

C4 = an theological inference usually based on another inference (e.g. infant baptism)

Dispensationalists who found their views on literal interpretation ought not to traffic in C4 formulations since they are not linked to the plain sense of Scripture and have to take advantage of a theological hermeneutics at variance with the system.

For this reason I think DT and TULIP are odd bedfellows (I also agree with 5 point Calvinists that 4 pointers who assent to four of the five formulations of TULIP are inconsistent).

What I am concerned with in these posts is the question of whether or not the kind of interpretative approach which persuades a person to be a dispensationalist works just as well in persuading them of the Five Points of Calvinism. I might put it another way: will ones reasons for holding to dispensationalism suffice to bring them to embrace TULIP?

1. A Reformed Definition of Total Depravity [with clear references supplied]:

Because of the fall, man is unable of himself to savingly believe the gospel. The sinner is dead [Gen. 2:17; Eph. 2:1], blind [2 Cor. 4:4], and deaf [to the things of God; his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt [Jer. 17:9]. His will is not free, it is in bondage to his evil nature [Rom. 1:18-22, 3:10-18; Jn. 3:19-21] therefore, he will not—indeed he cannot—choose good over evil in the spiritual realm [Gen. 8:21; Jer. 13:23]. Consequently, it takes much more than the Spirit’s assistance to bring a sinner to Christ—it takes

regeneration by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature. Faith is not something man contributes to salvation but is itself a part of God's gift of salvation—it is God's gift to the sinner [Phil. 1:29?], not the sinner's gift to God.

(Genesis 2:15-17, Romans 5:12, Psalm 51:5, 1 Corinthians 2:14, Romans 3:10-18, Jeremiah 17:9, John 6:44, Ephesians 2:1-10) – David N. Steele & Curtis C. Thomas, The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented (1963), 16.

I have underlined the parts in these statements that I think are difficult to establish from a plain reading of Scripture without the imposition of a theologized hermeneutics (i.e. a C4 formulation). Before I engage these statements (and the verses used to support them) I shall outline my understanding of Total Depravity.

2. Total Depravity: A Summary of My Position:

A good place to start is Genesis 8:21, where even after the Flood and with only eight people alive, God assesses the state of the human heart.

And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. – Genesis 8:21

God sustains this post-flood world while knowing that in doing so He must put up with sin in every person's heart (heart in Scripture includes their drives and reasonings as well as their emotions). Notice it is man's "intention" or inclination to perpetrate evil, even while young. This "evil" is that which is contrary to God and His righteous purpose for man. Man is not inclined to good because he is not inclined to God.

We "drink up iniquity like we drink water" (Job 15:16). Therefore, Joshua's indictment of Israel holds true for us all; we cannot serve God (Josh. 24:19). But that suits the sinner, since, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way" (Isa. 53:6). Thus, we are all the subjects of the prophet's remark: "Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear." (Isa.59:2). These "iniquities" remember, come from a heart that is always manufacturing them. That is the default setting of the natural heart.

The OT never veers from this course. The God who sees into every man's heart is unambiguous in His opinion of it (e.g. Psa. 44:21; 90:8; Jer. 2:22). The texts are unanimous and very clear. Just as no leopard can ever change its spots, so human beings can never do what God can count "good" seeing we are accustomed to do evil (Jer. 13:23).

The NT supplies us with more information. Jesus calls the human heart "evil" – even the hearts of His disciples (Matt. 7:11). In [another post](#) I wrote this (btw, I really need to finish that series!):

The Truth about fallen man is this: he is a hater of God (Rom. 1:30),

counting God as his enemy (Rom. 5:10), failing to give Him glory or thanks (Rom. 1:21). The sin within fallen man is pervasive, coloring everything he does. Therefore, he does not like to retain God in his thoughts (Rom. 1:28), preferring to exchange the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1:26). Man is at enmity with his Maker (Rom. 8:7). Although made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), and originally made upright, man has actively sought out many wicked calculations (Eccles. 7:29). He tells himself lies – sometimes very elaborate ones – which he uses to deny the rights of God, and even the very existence of God (Rom. 1:22-23, 25). Yet, according to the Bible, man has this nagging awareness that he will be judged (Rom. 1:32), which makes his rebellious response all the more an insult. He is evil (Matt. 7:11), having his understanding darkened and his heart blinded (Eph. 4:18). In short, he is reigned over by sin (Rom. 5:21a). On top of all this, mankind is so morally perverse as to believe that, if he needs redemption, he can have a hand in it himself!

Hence, I would agree with every passage cited under [Total Depravity](#) in the list I have linked to provided by Monergism. All of them could be classified as **C1** or **C2** texts and could be inserted into a doctrinal formulation without much or any explanation. That is, every passage with the exception of Jn. 3:3, 14:16 and 2 Cor. 1:9. Let me explain my reservations on the use of these.

3. Reservations About the Use of Some Texts

- John 3:3 states, “...Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” This means that a person must be born again in order to “see” the kingdom of God. But what does that mean? Kostenberger says it means to participate in the eschatological kingdom. Leon Morris writes, “We are probably not meant to put much difference between seeing and entering (v.5)” – L. Morris, *The Gospel According To John*, NICNT, (1st edition), 214. Hence, to “see” is to enter, to participate (Cf. Matt. 18:13). Why then has this to do with Total Depravity? Sure, a person must be regenerated before they can enter what D. A. Carson calls “God’s saving and transforming reign”, but nothing is said here about man’s actual state. Of course, the verse is slipped in to do a certain job, a job it was never intended to do.
- John 14:16 says, “And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever”. This verse is a promise of the Holy spirit and has no contribution to make to the doctrine we are discussing.
- 2 Corinthians 1:9 says, “But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.” By “raises [or, the raiser of] the dead” Paul means that he is trusting in God to empower and renew him in the midst of his daily struggles. The verse is akin to passages like 2 Cor. 4:7-10f., or Gal. 6:14. Why was it included in a list about Total Depravity? Most readers know why. It and Jn. 3:3 are being shanghaied to teach that regeneration precedes faith. This explains my underlining in the Steele & Thomas definition

above. So we need to turn our attention to that subject.

4. Questions About Some Assertions About Total Depravity by Reformed Writers:

Within the definition of Total Depravity given by Steele & Thomas I inserted what I thought were some of the best **C1** or **C2** passages which support each proposition. However, I did not insert any biblical reference to support the propositions I underlined. The reason I did not do this is because I do not believe that there are any texts available except they be deployed as supports for **C4** formulations. That is to say, the texts are being misused to teach a doctrine they in fact don't teach, but which some people strongly believe is biblical. Here is the section under scrutiny:

(1) Consequently, it takes much more than the Spirit's assistance to bring a sinner to Christ—(2) it takes regeneration by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature. (3) Faith is not something man contributes to salvation but is itself a part of God's gift of salvation

(1) If by “the Spirit’s assistance” is meant the Spirit helping the sinner to make the right decision I would agree with them on the grounds of what has already been said. But if what is meant includes *any and every* activity of the Spirit apart from regeneration I cannot see how that can be proved. In fact the clear example of Cornelius in Acts 10 (he wasn't born again until the end of the chapter) shows that a sinner can be drawn to God (Jn. 6:44) before being regenerated. This is to say nothing of biblical passages which seem to go directly against this teaching.

(2) Where in either Testament is a passage (**C1**, **C2** or even **C3**) which teaches that “it takes regeneration by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature” in order for him to come to Christ? None of the passages listed by Steele & Thomas or anywhere else I've seen point to this. We acquiesce to their statement that “Men left to their dead state are unable of themselves to repent, to believe the gospel, or to come to Christ...etc” (29). But how does this prove regeneration prior to faith? One may claim it as an inevitable outcome of this “deadness” (to be discussed under Irresistible Grace), but that is all it is – a claim. But it is not a strong claim in view of Acts 10, or, for example, Galatians 3:2, where Paul asks, “This only would I learn of you, did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, *or by the hearing of faith?*” This question assumes the answer, “we received the Spirit through faith.” Since the Holy Spirit is the Agent of the new birth (regeneration – Cf. Acts 10:47, 11:15-17), Galatians 3:2 provides a pretty telling rebuttal to this statement. I would say it's plain sense leads to the conclusion that regeneration comes after faith. I would class this as a **C2 formulation**, whereas I find no plain sense texts (**C1** or **C2**) which teach this aspect of the classic TULIP formulation of Total Depravity.

(3) “Faith is not something man contributes to salvation but is itself a part of God's gift of salvation.” There are no **C1** or **C2** texts to support this notion. Ephesians 2:8-9 is often drafted in to teach salvation is a gift and faith is part of salvation, but this (mis)use of the text assumes what it needs to prove. I am persuaded mainly on the basis of Philippians 1:29 (**C3** since it is not definitive) that faith is a gift, but I am far from being persuaded

that faith is given after the Spirit regenerates the sinner (this, btw, is a major plank of John Owen's argument in *The Death of Death*). And I have not run into any supporting passage which is not press-ganged into illegitimate service of this proposition.

This same kind of formulation can be read in Articles 12 and 13 of the Canons of Dort. Article 12 reads:

And this is that regeneration so highly extolled in Scripture, that renewal, new creation, resurrection from the dead, making alive, which God works in us without our aid. But this is in no wise effected merely by the external preaching of the gospel, by moral suasion, or such a mode of operation that, after God has performed His part, it still remains in the power of man to be regenerated or not, to be converted or to continue unconverted; but it is evidently a supernatural work, most powerful, and at the same time most delightful, astonishing, mysterious, and ineffable; not inferior in efficacy to creation or the resurrection from the dead, as the Scripture inspired by the Author of this work declares; so that all in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually regenerated, and do actually believe. Whereupon the will thus renewed is not only actuated and influenced by God, but in consequence of this influence becomes itself active. Wherefore also man himself is rightly said to believe and repent by virtue of that grace received. – Canons of Dort, Heads 3-4: Article 12.

Every assertion we make requires solid scriptural support, especially if we are intent upon preaching it dogmatically. This is where regeneration before faith falls down. Our task is not to settle on a doctrine and then imply other doctrines from it. It is to build each doctrine up from its scriptural base and then to attempt to systematize the whole. As a dispensationalist, I do not see how I can formulate a doctrine of Total Depravity which includes this last clause. Why so? Because I find no hermeneutical warrant for such a formulation.

In fact we are asserting another doctrine when we say regeneration before faith. We have left off Total Depravity.

Conclusion Regarding the 'T' of TULIP

The Apostle wrote, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." (Rom. 1:19-20).

"Now this can signify nothing but alienation and enmity of mind. Men are willing and industrious to know other things and labor after the knowledge of them, but they decline the knowledge of God and his ways, being alienated from God through the blindness of their heart... (Eph. 4:18). This heart blindness is chosen and voluntary blindness and signifies their having no mind or will to things of that nature. It is a wonderful thing to consider how man is capable of forming a thought, how a thought arises in our minds, and how sad it is to consider that though God has given to men this thinking power, yet

they will not think of Him.” – John Howe, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4. ‘Sermon on Man’s Enmity Against God.’ (362-367).

There is always much more to say, but one has to stop somewhere. I know there are others more brilliant than me who will disagree with what I have said, but this is my take on why dispensationalists cannot hold to TULIP as formulated by the standard texts of Reformed theology.