

Dispensationalism and TULIP – A Verdict

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You can read the previous articles in the series [here](#).

In these posts I have tried to demonstrate how the kind of hermeneutical processes involved in bringing an individual to espouse dispensational premillennial eschatology will cause him (or her) NOT to espouse 5-Point Calvinism, or its companion, regeneration prior to faith. I have done this by using a grid or filter for checking doctrines based on comparing theological propositions with the Bible. I believe that I have shown that TULIP cannot pass muster in this regard. I would add quite confidently (though let it not be construed as pride) that most of the major assertions of Reformed covenant theology are unable to make it “under the radar” of this grid.

I want to make it clear that I developed this way of looking at theological statements to see what I and others were actually doing when formulating doctrine. In the course of recording and editing seven courses on Systematic Theology (over 200 lectures) for the school, I became aware of the importance of measuring what I might term the “propositional distance” between any given statement of a doctrine and the biblical passages used to support it. I wanted a way of checking this “distance” and came up with my (now) five Categories:

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

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

C3 = a plausible inference based on the cumulative direction of C1 and C2 texts of Scripture (e.g. the pre-trib rapture)

C4 = a theological inference usually based on another inference instead of any plain statement of Scripture (e.g. the covenant of grace, based on ideas like “the one people of God” and “the church as the new Israel”)

After conversing with my monthly Bible study group I would now add to these a C5 category:

C5 = a theological inference based on other theological inferences which are often supported by other inferences without reference to plain statements of Scripture (e.g. Sunday being “the Christian Sabbath” and replacing the Jewish Sabbath).

I shall expound this Grid another time in much more detail, and for now C4 and C5 categories can be collapsed into one. Thus, as I wrote before:

*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.

I fully intend to run both my Statement of Faith and my Theology lectures through this grid in the coming months and years (perhaps I will blog about my progress as I go 😊). I want to tighten up the scriptural screws that hold my theology together. I believe it will make me a bit sharper in the process. But I am clear that C4 and C5 categories should be inadmissible to someone employing consistent grammatico-historical (plain-sense) interpretation.

Now turning to the 5 points, I saw that here was a set of important dogmas held by some dispensationalists whom I respect, but who, I was sure, were allowing themselves to infer these doctrines, not from straightforward exegesis of the Bible, but rather, it seemed to me, from either an already adopted theological standpoint or else from some intuitive sense that these so-called “doctrines of grace” must be biblical. In either case, these brethren have stepped outside of the parameters of grammatico-historical interpretation (G-H), and were trafficking in forms of theological hermeneutics.

I have spent over a quarter of a century studying books and listening to lectures and arguments for TULIP and Reformed theology and I now more than ever am left unsatisfied with the biblical credentials of TULIP. I wrote these posts to demonstrate my point. (Let me include here that I feel like swatting anyone who brands me an “Arminian” just so they can dispatch me to the theological undergrowth and forget about me). Not that I have to be heard, but if I am to be given a hearing I wish it to be with both ears.

So then, what about Dispensationalism and the doctrines of grace? How did they fare when measured by a “plain sense hermeneutic” – the hermeneutics of dispensational premillennialism? Not well at all. When the crucial propositions which support TULIP were compared with the scriptural passages from which they are supposed to be derived, it was seen that none of these propositions qualified above a C4 category! Since C4's and C5's are formulations which have no clear and unequivocal relation to any passage of Scripture my conclusion was and is that they lie outside of the zone within which dispensationalists ought to construct a coherent theology with their espoused hermeneutics.

I don't want to simply repeat what I said in the previous five articles. Please go and read them for yourself if you're interested. All I want to say here is that I can't find one solid C1 to C3 scriptural statement that supports any of the necessary assumptions upon which TULIP depends. For example, in the third post I wrote:

*The proposition “Christ died only for His elect” or, “Christ died only for those who will be saved,” is not supported by any **C1, C2 or C3** passage (if anyone can show me otherwise I would appreciate it). Recall, a **C1** passage is a straightforward text which agrees with a proposition by directly stating it in so many words. Nor, as we have*

just said, is this teaching upheld by any C2 passages (a combination of usually C1 texts on related matters which strongly (even inevitably) lead one to the conclusion summed up in the proposition). Nor is the doctrine supported by any C3 texts (indirect passages which, when taken together, produce good though defeasible evidence for the proposition).

Limited atonement is often thought of as the weak link of TULIP (In fact it is essential to the system, especially the next point). But the other points of TULIP, as they are defined by the standard works of Reformed theology, suffer similar problems.

In the post on Total Depravity I cited Steele & Thomas as asserting:

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.

This was also shown to be taught by the Canons of Dordt (and many other Reformed works of course), and is the old peach about regeneration preceding faith. Unfortunately, there is not one scriptural text which bolsters this teaching: certainly not any which rise above a C4 ranking on my Grid. Again, if anyone can produce a text or texts which actually state this truth or conspire to compel it I would be glad to hear of it. The texts used by the Reformed works I know of do not do the job.

Under Unconditional Election I brought out the fact, sometimes overlooked, that the election in view is that believed under the auspices of the covenant of grace, and concerns the “one people of God.” This is pertinent to the discussion because the hermeneutics of dispensationalism; the sort which distinguishes Israel and the Church, is the hermeneutics which has no truck with the covenant of grace. I also pointed out that the teaching of “double predestination” which this doctrine brings with it, is also not supported by plain texts of Scripture.

We have already said something about Limited Atonement so I shall simply add this from my post:

Whatever our Reformed brethren want to do with their interpretations is, from the standpoint of these articles, their own business. Their theology is far more deductive and their hermeneutics more theologically driven. But the deductions of a Reformed theologian are not all open to a Dispensational theologian: definite atonement being an example of this.

Moving to the fourth point, Irresistible Grace, I countered the Reformed teaching from a dispensational point of view. My main concern was to show how “Effectual Calling” as they describe it is (once again) an inference deduced from

the theology already in place and not a careful listening to what the Bible is saying. "Regeneration preceding faith" was again dealt with.

The final letter of TULIP concerns the Perseverance of the Saints. The sticky wicket which one soon finds oneself on is the question "who are the saints?" This point, when considered alongside of Unconditional election and Limited Atonement does not make it easy to answer the question with clarity. The answer often looks tautologous. You know who the saints are because they persevere. This is not the doctrine of Eternal Security as we endeavored to show (and as many 5 pointers admit).

I explained via personal experience and with the help of A.N. Martin that 5 pointers often warn fellow believers about the danger of damnation. Here is another example:

*We have insisted throughout this book that the New Testament directs its admonitions and warnings to believers. We have also argued that these warnings do not merely threaten believers with losing rewards but that eternal life is at stake....If believers apostatize their destiny is the lake of fire, the second death, hell. These warnings cannot be waved aside and relegated to those who are not genuine Christians. They are directed to believers and must be heeded for us to be saved on the last day...If we quit during the middle of the race, we will not receive eternal life." – Thomas R. Schreiner & Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (2001), 179.*

I realize, of course, that these authors then back off from these threatenings and turn them into incentives, but you see the problem: the question of assurance looms horribly large! And although we commend these Reformed writers for not wanting to circumvent (like e.g. Zane Hodges) the warning passages (particularly in Hebrews), the fact remains their doctrine is not calculated to bring comfort to "true" believers. Just like P. T. O'Brien in his recent Hebrews Commentary, they let the texts in Hebrews 6 & 10 speak, but then they also end up making God guilty of Divine sabre-rattling against the elect; a way of keeping them on their toes. I shall not try to expound the warning passages in this post, but I shall say that a consistent dispensationalist can let them say what they say and yet still hold to Eternal Security in the church.

Anyhow, those are my findings and my reasons; at least some of them. If somebody would like to help me see where I have erred and demonstrate it to me I should be most interested to see what they have to say. I know some dispensationalists will insist they can be 5 pointers or 4 pointers in the Reformed sense and in agreement with Reformed confessions and dogmatics. But I cannot for the life of me see how they do it without paying slight regard to the form of hermeneutics which makes them dispensational premillennialists. The tension between dispensationalism and TULIP has forced many

dispensationalists (e.g. A. W. Pink, Bruce Waltke, S. Lewis Johnson) to abandon the former in order to keep a firm grip on the latter. The tension is real. I do not see a way to overcome it.