

## The Tulip Trap

Arthur Wellesley, the brilliant British General who stopped Napoleon at Waterloo, had already posted an incredible record of battlefield victories against enemy armies greatly superior in numbers. When asked how he achieved consistent success without defeat, he replied, "I never engage an enemy on grounds I cannot hold. I will retreat and wait until I can control the place and terms of the battle."

The late D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, whom I believe to be the keenest Bible expositor of modern times, had a similar strategy toward the many liberal churchmen, philosophers and atheists who opposed his ministry and wanted to have a try at his remarkable mind. He flatly refuses the "fireside chat" forums and the public exhibition debates as settings that could only cheapen and trivialize the gospel he revered. When he did engage these enemies of truth, he utterly devastated them. "I will not begin a discussion with them," he said, "on philosophical grounds or using their terminology. I make them come to the Bible and state their arguments in strictly scriptural terms." He never lost a battle when the grounds and terms were the inspired word of God.

This is a profound principle, and imminently worthy of our adoption. It is a little realized, but well used tactic of the devil, to create a commotion off to the side, attract our attention, and draw us apart from our Spirit-led course. The enemy, then having chosen the ground and dictated the terms, proceeds to give us a sound walloping. Stung by defeat, we then regroup, reorganize (often with more and better flesh), and to at him again and again. Even when we "win" we have lost, for he has succeeded in diverting us from our God-ordered task. He, not we or God, has decided where our energies will be spent. And when we come away, smiling and feeling more than a little puffed up about "putting down error", we usually have a creed or a doctrine that is stated in the most negative, provocative and unscriptural terms imaginable . . . something we would never have come up with from straightforward Bible study. We should have been better off by following the wise example of Nehemiah, who declined the council proposed by his enemies with, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down: why should the work cease, whilst I leave it, and come down to you?" (Nehemiah 6:3)

The great historical church councils and synods are applauded as having hammered out the cardinal doctrines and creeds of the Church. That is, we are told that the Church is better off with what came out of a controversy with the devil than she was with just what comes out of the Bible, the verbally inspired word of God. Somehow that doesn't sound just right. Was not God able to give us these creeds and doctrines stated verbally and straightforward in the Bible? Did He deliberately speak so ambiguously and antithetically that men's great minds had to get together and *derive* a clear statement that is better than Bible language? That doesn't sound just right, either.

If the councils and synods enriched the spirituality of the Church by supplanting the word of God with their findings and formulations, then why has its decline only been accelerated after their pronouncements?

It is worthy of consideration that all these grand convocations of great ecclesiastical minds occurred in the Established Churches, "High Churchmanship", the hybrid that resulted from Constantinian combination of Church and State. The outcasts, heretics, the pure Christianity that refused to be a part of this apostasy, never had any such councils. We have no derived creeds and dogmas left us by the Donatists, Paulicians, Bogomils, Cathars, Waldensans, Lollards, or Anabaptists. They had no councils because they needed none. They were doing quite well with the word of God as it was; and have, for the most part, just knocked along with the Bible and Biblical terminology. Which is precisely what has kept them out of the popular Church that has the blessing of the worldly Establishment. It is in these non-Catholic non-Protestant, non-Reformed, out-of-the-mainline churches that true Christian life and ministry still survives, while the great Protestant denominations which gave us the creeds, doctrines and formulations, apostatize and die. Could this be because the latter get to thinking more of their creedal statements than they do the Bible?

Occasionally one of these "strictly Bible" churches, desirous of enhancing its respectability in the ecclesiastical community, decides to incorporate some of the creeds and terminology of the great councils and synods. Very soon after it begins crowing the creeds and clarifying the Bible in the light of past controversy-forged terminology, it becomes as dead as last Tuesday's fish.

I know that I am taking the Boss Bull by the horns in making these remarks; but I have been preaching in Sovereign Grace meetings for over twenty years. Sadly enough, in many of them, it seems that the main objective is to get your Calvinistic itch scratched. Oh, all the proper cosmetics are applied in the promotions: "To glorify God and humble the pride of man", "Back to the faith of the founding fathers", "Recovery of sound Bible doctrine". But if the required buzz-words (Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Preservation of the Saints), are not liberally sounded in the message, one is suspected of being a "rank Arminian"; and in this company, one had rather be accused of being unscriptural than of being unCalvinistic. And that is no exaggeration!!!

The dearth of conversions in modern day Calvinistic churches is not without cause. Most of what little growth we experience comes in the form of people who were converted under Arminian preaching and are now being converted to Calvinism. This is not surprising, since most of our preaching is conducive to making theological converts rather than gospel converts. Rarely, indeed, do we see a soul converted to Christ under contemporary "five point" grace preaching. I well know that few people are being soundly converted today, and that most Arminian evangelism is man-centered and produces many spurious decisions. But even after discounting all that shallow, superficial flesh, most people do come to Christ under a ministry uncluttered with the terminology of the councils and synods. The curse causeless does not come.

I have qualified such Calvinistic preaching as contemporary and modern day. For God did, indeed, greatly use Calvinistic preaching in the 18<sup>th</sup> century revivals and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary movement. But one does not have to read too much of the preaching of that day before he is made aware of a stark contrast between it and most “Sovereign Grace” preaching of today.

Afire with the love of God and horrified with the monstrosity that passed itself off as Christianity in their day, Edwards, Prelinghuysen, Tennet, Whitfield and scores of others brought the scowls and thunders of Mt. Sinai to men’s eyes and ears. They magnified a holy, offended God, held men out over the flames of hell, extolled the beauties, glories, comforts and entreaties of a sufficient and seeking Saviour, and entreated men to come to Christ. Whitfield preached, “Ye must be born again”, not as “Total Depravity” or “Irresistible Grace”, but as it is in the Bible, “Ye must be born again”. Spurgeon’s sermons are loved by Calvinist and Arminian alike, for though he was a Calvinist, he preached in Bible terms with an evangelist’s heart. And God blessed his labors as He has no other Baptist preacher’s.

We, on the other hand, sound as if we had understood the Lord to say, “Go ye into all the world and stamp out Arminianism.” Thoroughly disgusted with the travesty of the gospel which modern popular Christendom calls evangelism, we strike out against “decisionism”, declaring that salvation is determined by God’s election, not man’s decision. We decry “freewillism”, asserting the total inability of man to will anything godly. We attack implicit synergism: “God has done His part. Now you must do yours.” “If you will take the first step, God will do the rest,” affirming that Bible salvation is all of God and none of man. We do preach that Christ died for sinners, but quickly add, “only for some sinners”. We demand that our hearers repent of their sins, but warn them that they must first be granted repentance. We urge them to come to Christ, but assure them that they cannot come until they are irresistibly drawn by the Holy Spirit. We are so anxious that our evangelism be strictly theologically correct according to the orthodox doctrines and creeds, that we dull its cutting edge, chill its fire, and either bore our audiences to sleep or confuse them to despair with seeming antinomies. As well intentioned as this may be, it is not Biblical preaching. We use our Bible as a textbook, but feel constrained to interpret every verse as a statement of one of the five points. We preach, not so much the Christ of the Bible, as the Christ of the Creeds. We preach, not so much salvation for lost sinners, but high theology of salvation. And we are constantly quenching the smoking flax and breaking the bruised reed with our cold and brittle fixations.

It is possible that we lost more than the Remonstrants did at the Synod of Dort in 1619. Although the synod succeeded in condemning Jacob Hermann’s five points, it came away with five points of its own that have proven, in subsequent generations of churchmen, to supplant both Christ and the Bible as the central message of Christianity. We have Jacob Hermann (Latin, Arminius) to thank, together with our willingness to do battle with him on his own grounds, for the acrostic “T-U-L-I-P”. For had he not succeeded in provoking the synod with his five points of Arminianism, there most certainly would have never been any five points of Calvinism.\* There cannot be found anywhere in the Bible anything to approximate such a grouped systemization of the teachings of salvation. The soil in which this TULIP grows is not Bible teaching, but philosophical statements derived from certain *separate* Bible teachings. They are not put together in such a fashion in the word of God, but in a systematic theology forged by men’s minds. I do not think I am splitting fine hairs or playing with semantics here. The issues are real and their import substantial, which I will seek to demonstrate. Lest I should lose the Calvinistic section of my audience now, I hasten to affirm that I do believe the Bible truth that TULIP seeks to represent. My problem is not with the truth, but with the terms and context in which the truth is represented.

**Total Depravity.** This, of course, is not a Biblical term. It is derived from certain Bible passages such as Isaiah 59:2-13 and Romans 3:9-18, which declare that all of natural man’s faculties have been polluted by sin, and that he has no desire for God and righteousness. But “depravity” has the connotation of utter abandon, of licentious fiends, of murderous madness. It is unnecessarily offensive and irrational to the “respectable citizen” who has a social and moral conscience. In our effort to refute the imagined spark of divine righteousness Arminians impute to man, we choose an unbiblical word that can only exacerbate the offense of the gospel. The offense that is of the gospel is not ours. We may and must preach it blamelessly. But an offense that is of our own invention is our responsibility, and we may not be able to exempt ourselves from the woe threatened in Luke 17:1-2.

Nor is the alternative, “Total Inability”, any better. Although inability certainly describes the sinner’s state more accurately and biblically than depravity, it is a term which is never employed in preaching the gospel to sinners. What nonsense to preach to sinners that they must repent and believe, but then tell them that they have no ability to do so. One may reply that it is the truth, and therefore it should be declared even if it makes no sense to natural man. It is quite true that this is a fact that needs to be set forth in due season and in the proper setting. Jesus used it to stop the mouths of haughty religionists and enemies of the Gospel, but we never find the Bible evangelists using it in Gospel preaching to lost sinners. Peter at Pentecost, in response to “What shall we do?” – “Why, you must wait until you are regenerated and enabled to repent and believe.” Absurd!

Total Inability further runs afoul of Scripture passages dealing with apostasy. How have these unregenerate, and therefore “totally blind”, persons been “enlightened”, “received the knowledge of the truth”, “escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ”? How have these who have absolutely no appetite for spiritual things or no capacity to appreciate the things of God “tasted of (experienced) the heavenly gift, the good word of God” and “the powers of the world to come”? (Hebrews 6:4-6); 10\_26-29; 2 Peter 2:20). In order to defend Inability and Total Depravity, we are compelled to do all sorts of fancy side-stepping. Rather than abandon this creedal conclusion of the human mind, we will import strange and forced principles of hermeneutics, and impose them upon these passages. We cannot let them mean what they plainly say, but must cause them to conform to the analogy of our creed.

No, we are not told to preach inability to sinners, but *responsibility!* Not total depravity, but lostness, condemnation, the wrath of God, and Christ the only Refuge for confessed sinners who have no power to save themselves.

**Unconditional Election.** Election is a solid Bible term, and had not the error of election based upon foreseen merit, the non-biblical adjective “unconditional” would not have been brought forth. This doctrine is nowhere verbally stated in the Bible. It is logically derived from the doctrine of total depravity; for if all men are totally ruined, then no choice God made could be based upon

foreseen merit or faith, since none would be possible. Some support is found in such passages as Romans 9:11. But even this stark declaration of God's sovereignty in election fails to verify the Tulip system. "Neither having done any good or evil" is somewhat

\*In fairness to Arminius, it must be noted that it was his followers who formulated the five points in the form represented by the Remonstrants after his death.

short of "not foreseeing any evil Esau might do and knowing both to be utterly incapable of any good deed". This whole chapter sets forth unequivocally the prerogative of God to do as He pleases with His creation. But the idea of God being the first cause is not unique to election. He is affirmed by all who believe in divine sovereignty to be the first cause of all things, even the fall of man. But we do not thereby logically charge God with responsibility for man's fall, since we grant validity to secondary causes. Is it not therefore somewhat inconsistent if we stop short of saying that God was the immediate cause of man's fall, affirming Biblically that man mediated that fall by his own free rebellion, but refuse any mediating responsibility in man's election? I am just asking the question. If we are going to build a system on logic, then let us apply the logic consistently. If not, then let us stay with the Bible.

What does the Bible say? The whole of the Book is loaded with statements which condition God's favors on men's actions or what is in men's hearts. Just a few from the New Testament: Matthew 24:42-46; John 2:24; 3:15, 16, 18, 36, 5:14, 24; 7:17; 12:35-36; 14:21-23; Romans 1:18-32; 2:1-9. Of course, these scriptures are surrounded by those which, on the other hand, declare the free election of God. We must not say that one is more true than the other because of more or less scripture. Both must be allowed to stand in the light of the whole Bible, and they should be preached in their contextual settings without their cutting edges being dulled by some creedal formula. Unconditional Election is a derived doctrine and has no Biblical setting it can call its own. It is, therefore, inferior to a pure Biblical text, and ought not be allowed to interfere with honest Bible exegesis and exposition, especially for an unconverted audience.

We who have emphasized the unconditional aspect of election rightly claim it undergirds and adorns the free grace of God in salvation. But it cannot be denied that an unbiblical emphasis on this doctrine fuels the antinomian fires of eternal justification. The isolation of God's free election from the gospel conditions of justification and salvation gives rise to a low view of law and righteousness. It promotes a false resting in the election of God and postulates a false salvation without experiential repentance and faith. Such ideas as these do not and cannot come from strictly Bible terms. They come from a creedal statement derived from Bible terms . . . a doctrine from a doctrine from a philosophical view of Bible statements.

**Limited Atonement.** This is the point objected to more than any others by non-Calvinists. It is the first to be attacked and the last to be received. Logically, it is the easiest to defend. If God chose to save certain people, it was necessary for Him to provide atonement for them and no others. Limited atonement, however, is nowhere stated in the scriptures. The emphasis in the Bible in respect to the death of Christ is always on its plenitude, not its limitations. We may try to read it into John 10:11, but it is not there. Jesus is not here limiting his atonement to the sheep but contrasting Himself to the thief and hireling who care not for the sheep. We might like Him to have said, "for the sheep only", but what he said is, He "giveth his life for the sheep". And when we read that passage and add "only" or "not for the goats" we are not only adding to the word of God but perverting the plain meaning of the scriptures to our own ends, and are in danger of bringing upon ourselves the plagues of Revelation 22:18.

This is always the emphasis put on the death of Christ in the Bible: The love, the kindness, the sacrifice, the suffering, the fullness, the completion, the effectiveness and the substitutionary aspect of the atonement.

We know that we are speaking of the design and intent, not value, when we see the word, "limited". But that does not mean our hearers understand we mean that. To them, we are reducing the love and mercy of God in Christ.

I do not think that the Holy Spirit intended for the sacrifice of Christ to be presented to sinners as a "limited" thing. If so, we would find that terminology in the Bible. And we can do no better than proclaim the death of our Lord as a full and adequate satisfaction for all the sins of all who believe in Him. That is what the Bible says, and, it seems to me, should be the burden of our preaching.

**Irresistible Grace.** Since God unconditionally elected out of all totally depraved sinners some to eternal salvation and secured their righteous standing before Him in the specific and effectual atonement of His Son, and since these must be made experimentally as well as legally righteous, then grace must be brought to their hearts. If the sinner's evil will is allowed to prevail, God's purpose will be frustrated and His will in election will fail. Hence the doctrine of irresistible grace.

Again, this is not Bible terminology, and, although it is intended to express the same truth, it is inferior to the language of scripture. The Bible speaks of the Holy Spirit's "convincing" (John 16:8), of Christ "drawing" (John 12:32), of God's people being "willing" in the day of His power (Psalm 110:3), of our "believing according to the working of his might power" (Ephesians 1:19). In a less positive vein, it speaks of men "pricked in their hearts" (Acts 2:37), of the "Lord opening the heart" (Acts 16:14), of God commanding the light (of the gospel) to shine in our hearts (2 Cor. 4:6), of God "giving repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:25). All of these are wholesome expressions of the powerful and effectual working of God's grace in bringing the objects of His love to Himself. They do not provoke that false charge of God forcing Himself upon those who do not want Him that is so often leveled against irresistible grace. That, of course, is not what we intend when we use that term, but it is what people hear.

Jacob Arminius gave us "irresistible grace", just as surely as if he had written the creed for us. It was conceived in the Synod of Dort expressly for the purpose of refuting Arminius' claim that God's grace in salvation can be effectively resisted by the sinner so that he will not be saved. But it should never have found its way into our popular preaching. It is not to be found in New Testament evangelism at all. Had Paul been infected with the misplaced optimism nourished in many moderns by Irresistible Grace, upon hearing Agrippa's "Almost thou persuadest me", he would have smiled slyly and replied, "Don't worry; when the Holy Spirit draws you, you will come just like I did." That sort of statement might be hypothetical truth, but it is ludicrous to make it in such a setting.

By way of contrast, let us rather take the example of Jesus: “Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” So far from giving sinners a hope that God will overcome their rebellion, reluctance, and hesitation or passivity, they should be urged to call upon every available resource to press into the kingdom of God. That is Biblical evangelism.

**Preservation or Perseverance of the Saints.** This point merits special consideration: First, it is the only one upon which a positive stance was not taken in the original Remonstrance. It was simply stated that “Whether or not the truly regenerate will certainly persevere is a point that needs more study.” Later Arminians, however, positively stated that as long as a person lived he could “fall from grace”. Secondly, this is the only one of the points that uses Bible terms, although persevere is found only once (Ephesians 6:18), and “preservation” (usable in the sense considered) occurs only twice (Psalm 37:28, 1 Thessalonians 5:23). The Bible, however, abounds with the truth at which this point aims. Thirdly, this is a most unnecessary point, since it most obviously must follow from the truth of election to eternal life. It would not be stated as a point at all but for the Remonstrance and widespread ignorance of the nature of eternal salvation. Fourthly, this is the point most wrangled over in popular religious debate. The reason for all this squabbling is, of course, the ignorance referred to above. When we have established that salvation is the free gift of eternal life to particular persons, determined by the immutable God for reasons within Himself from eternity to eternity, this becomes a moot point. If you take election out of the Bible, then the Arminians are right, not only about this, but everything else as well. Not only may one lose salvation when once in possession of it, but he must earn it by meritorious works. So this doctrine stands or falls with divine election.

Perseverance, though it embodies the truth of the believer’s active and diligent participation in his being kept by the power of God, is inadequate to express the truth it seeks to represent. It fosters the idea of one’s eternal salvation resting entirely upon the person’s ability to hang on by his own strength as long as he lives. And if his strength fails, he will slide back into hell.

Preservation is likewise inadequate. It suggests the idea of passivity, non participation. Indeed, one preacher used an example, a jar of fruit *preserves* which he watched his mother prepare, seal and set on a shelf. There could hardly be a poorer example of God’s preservation of His true believers.

Other terms are worse yet: “once saved, always saved” actually arises from a purely Arminian and unbiblical concept of salvation. This Baptist cliché has salvation capsuled in a once-in-time experience that must be attained by man. If one can manage to get in, then God will immediately lock the door behind him so that he cannot get out.

“Eternal security of the believer” is probably the best one-statement term. But even this has problems, too. It smacks of “got-it-made” laxity, which the New Testament warns sharply against. “If any man thinks he stand, let him take heed lest he fall”. Paul never counted himself to have attained (1 Corinthians 9:27, Philippians 3:13). The whole of the New Testament is replete with warnings to believers to continue, to endure to hold fast their faith, lest they should fall away as many “believers” already had.

The truth is probably stated most clearly and completely in Jeremiah’s prophecy of the New Covenant. “*And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me forever, for the good of them, and of their children after them: And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me.*” (Jeremiah 32:39-40).

This is truth too high, too grand, too marvelous, too awesome for us. We can only cheapen it by our synopses and smart clichés. And what is true here is also true of each of these five points. It is best to let such truth come to us the way God intended in His inspired word.

It ought to be at least disconcerting to us that an enemy of divine sovereignty gave us the system we now call TULIP. We changed the doctrines but retained the form and system chosen by the Arminians. I maintain the gospel is clearer and more incisive without the system. And I, for one, intend to return to wielding the sword of the Spirit with its sharp two edges unblunted by men’s clever analysis. Time is short, men are perishing, the days of our labors are slipping away fast. Mortal ears will not hear our voices much longer. Let us redeem this precious time by giving them the pure word of God.

- C. M.