

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“T.U.L.I.P.”
Deuteronomy 30:4-10
John 6:63-65**

**Reformation Sunday
October 28, 2018**

Deuteronomy 30:4-10

If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. And the Lord your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you. And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord and keep all his commandments that I command you today. The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, when you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

John 6:63-65

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

“T.U.L.I.P.”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Happy Reformation Sunday! Now, for those of you who didn't realize it, you're in a Presbyterian church, and we are inheritors of the Protestant Reformation, which started 500 years ago. If you come from another tradition, like myself, you may be asking, “What makes Presbyterianism unique or distinctive?” Now, there are a lot of similarities between the denominations, and I firmly believe these similarities outweigh our differences and should motivate us to work together. However, to ignore our differences is to do a disservice to our identity and to our history.

One of the distinguishing features of historical Presbyterianism is something called the Five Points of Calvinism. Right off the bat, I will say, I don't think Calvin was a five-point Calvinist. In fact, I believe these famous—or infamous—five points are actually an oversimplification and twentieth century misrepresentation of sound and accurate doctrine. The five points come to us through the document called the Canons of Dort. Unfortunately, I don't have a copy of the Canons of Dort to show you, because it's quite a lengthy document. It's included as an appendix in one of my study Bibles, and there it takes up fifteen pages. So you can see how watering them down to the acronym TULIP does the Canons a great disservice. Nevertheless, TULIP has had a

lasting impact on our identity and theology, whether we know it or not, or like it or not. Therefore, for this Reformation Sunday, we will take a very brief look at the Five Points of Calvinism, where they are based in Scripture, and answer one misconception associated with that point. And, by the end, I hope to show what really matters when discussing Calvinism.

By a show of hands, how many of you can name one of the five points? How about two or three? Four? What about all five? [Count the nerds.] The “T” in TULIP stands for *total depravity*, or as I prefer, total *inability*. In a nutshell, this doctrine presupposes that a person is totally unable not to choose sin. Meaning, Man is naturally predisposed or inclined to seek after sin. People love to sin. If this were not true, then God would have no need for the Ten Commandments or the Greatest Commandment. In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul says, “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”¹ Even the Apostle realized that our natural disposition is toward the things of the flesh and not the things of the Spirit. This is exactly what played out shortly after creation. The one rule that God gave to Adam and Eve was, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”² We know that Adam and Eve did not die physically, at least not immediately. So is God a liar? Of course not! Upon eating of the forbidden fruit, Man became *spiritually* dead to God.

Being spiritually dead and bound to sin is what’s behind the doctrine of total depravity. Now I have a question for you: can things that are dead raise themselves back to life? By no means. Likewise, spiritually dead beings cannot bring themselves into spiritual quickening. In one of his replies to his interlocutors, Job says, “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one.”³ Now, we know that the Lord told Peter, “What God has made clean, do not call common.”⁴ This tells me that the only being in all of the universe who has the power to regenerate a person is God, himself. This is a fact our Lord shares with Nicodemus. He told the Pharisee, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”⁵ A new birth by the Spirit and in the Spirit is the only remedy to our total depravity.

Now springs a common misconception. Some take this doctrine to mean that there is nothing in us that is good in any respect. When we hear the phrase “total depravity,” we may come to conclude that a person is unable to do any good. This is not so, both in Scripture and in Calvinism. This isn’t true because, as we heard from Paul, we “have a desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”⁶ Moreover, chapter 16, section 7 of the Westminster Confession asserts that people are capable of doing good, “however, since [these good works] do not proceed from a heart purified by faith... they cannot please God nor make a person fit to receive grace from God.” What the doctrine of total depravity aims to reject is the notion that a person’s deeds affect her salvation, that somehow she can assuage God by her own actions, and that she is naturally inclined to choose good. What we see in Scripture is that this is the work of

the Spirit. The Spirit moves us to do good, the Spirit enables us to do good, and the Spirit presents us as good before the Lord.

The next point steps right off of this one, heel-to-toe. The “U” in TULIP is the doctrine of *unconditional election*, which means, simply, that a person’s salvation is not conditioned upon any virtuous quality or foreseen act. Meaning, God’s decision to save a sinner from her sins was not based on any foreseen response or obedience on her part, rather, God’s electing love gives to her the gift of faith and the ability to seek repentance. Now, we could spend a lot of time discussing and debating the doctrine of election. But that’s not what I want to focus on this morning. I want to look more deeply at the *unconditional* part of election. The Calvinist, going all the way back to Augustine and Paul, understands that faith and good works are the *result* of, and not the *cause* of, God’s adoptive love.

The Apostle writes to the Thessalonians, “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God *chose* you as the firstfruits to be saved, *through sanctification by the Spirit* and belief in the truth.”⁷ Here we see that Paul lifts up the Thessalonians’ sanctification by the Spirit as a result of God’s choosing and not their own. The prophet Malachi records God’s words to Israel, “I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated.”⁸ Some may have a hard time understanding this and may want to perceive God as unfair. That’s totally understandable and is not unique to our generation. When discussing that very passage, the Apostle Paul says to the church in Rome, “What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”⁹ God’s electing love is unconditional and based solely in his sovereign will.

Now, some believe Calvinists assert that a person is saved against her will. God forces the elect to be Christian and he’ll drag them into heaven kicking and screaming. Completely preposterous. The Holy Spirit’s sanctification of the elect does not negate the free will of those individuals. The Confession states that God “effectually draws them to Jesus Christ; but they come to him voluntarily, having been made willing by God’s grace.”¹⁰ What the Spirit does is remove the power of sin, and instill new powers of belief and trust. Again, not conditioned upon the response of belief and trust, nor forced, for—as we all know—we must each journey on our faith, maturing, tripping, and getting back up, all with the Spirit’s help.

The “L” in TULIP stands for *limited atonement*, and this doctrine, too, piggy-backs off the last one. I prefer calling this one “particular redemption” and it argues that Christ’s redeeming work was intended solely for and fully secures the adoption of the redeemed. Again, we don’t have time to talk about the whole of the redemption process, so suffice it to say Calvinists believe that Jesus’ death on the cross secures everything necessary for the salvation of the redeemed.

What calls for further examination is the limited nature of atonement. The Calvinist doesn’t believe in universal salvation. Our New Testament lesson this morning includes this caveat from

the Evangelist: “For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.”¹¹ This inclusion is not limited to Judas Iscariot, but of all the unredeemed. And this was known since the beginning of time, since Christ is himself the eternal Word made flesh. Having said that, there are those who like to strictly limit Christ’s atonement to very small numbers. This, the Calvinist also denies. Charles Spurgeon, one of the 19th century’s most prominent Calvinists has this to say:

“The Father’s love is not for a few only, but for an exceeding great company... I believe there will be more in heaven than in hell. If anyone asks me why I think so, I answer, because Christ, in everything, is to ‘have the preeminence,’ and I cannot conceive how he could have the preeminence if there are to be more in the dominions of Satan than in paradise... Christ shall have the preeminence at last; his train shall be far larger than that which shall attend the chariot of the grim monarch of hell.”¹²

The Calvinist rejects the unbiblical doctrine of universal salvation and rejects a constrictionist doctrine of limited salvation. The atoning sacrifice of Christ our Savior is fully sufficient and efficient for those whom God calls effectually.

The penultimate letter, “I”, represents *irresistible grace*, or better put, the efficacious call of the Spirit. I just said that Christ’s work on the cross is sufficient and efficient for those *whom God calls effectually*. There are two types of calls revealed in Scripture. One is the external call of the Gospel, which you’ll hear at nearly any church and from the street-corner preacher and from the door-to-door evangelist. This external call can be, and oftentimes is, ignored by the hearer. The other is the effectual call of God, which cannot be ignored and is heard solely and fully by the adopted or the redeemed or the elect; however you wish to call them. By the means of this special call, the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ.

Think about that word “irresistible.” We might use it to describe a sumptuous dessert. Sometimes, when I am walking by the pastries at Food Lion, there is an irresistible call for me to buy and devour their sugar cookies. I know y’all have experienced something similar. There’s something drawing me to that pastry that I just have to buy it. In the same way, God’s grace is so irresistible that it just cannot be ignored. Paul says this very succinctly in Romans 8:30, “Those whom God predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” This is the four-fold movement of God’s effectual calling.

Of course, when someone speaks about predestination there’s always someone else who asks, “What about free will?” This is the most popular critique of Calvinism: that we strip people of their free will. Clearly these critics have not actually read John Calvin. Now it’s not entirely their fault. This is an instance of language distortion over time. Today, when we think of a free will, we most often connect it to moral responsibility. I am responsible for my actions and I must be held accountable to those actions. That’s not incorrect; neither is it unbiblical. But that is not the 16th century understanding of the will. Our Reformation ancestors understood the will to mean

Man's ability to will his own salvation. The Confession affirms that upon humanity's fall from grace, people lost the ability to "will any spiritual good involving salvation." Rather, "when *God* converts a sinner" that person is liberated from an "enslavement to sin."¹³ We are still responsible for our actions before God and our responses to the Gospel, the Calvinist never denies this. What we affirm is that the human will requires an alien righteousness, a work which is foreign to us, in order to align our will with God's will. Actually, this leads me nicely into the final of the five points.

The "P" in TULIP stands for the *perseverance of the saints*, or the security of believers. Some folks, when they hear this point, they may think of self-preservation. It's the Christian's responsibility to prove to God that she is worthy of his constant love. I grew up in a tradition that posits any infraction of sin, whether great or small, could cast me into the eternal ruin of hell. I don't know about you, but I ain't perfect. I know that I am broken, my actions are tainted by sin, and while I strive to do my best, to be in perfect imitation of Christ, I know that I will fail at perfection. The doctrine of perseverance is actually talking about the Spirit's *keeping* us in faith. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews encourages us to "be grateful for receiving a kingdom that *cannot be shaken*."¹⁴ The inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven is reserved on our behalf as a work of the Holy Spirit and our adoption cannot be erased.

A popular figure in Christian music speaks to this. Now, I must say, I don't know if this person would consider himself a Calvinist, but I think the singer Tauren Wells is, at least, a secret Calvinist. While ruminating on this sermon I heard his song *Known*. How many of you have heard this song? The chorus goes like this:

I'm fully known and loved by You
You won't let go no matter what I do
And it's not one or the other
It's hard truth and ridiculous grace
To be known, fully known, and loved by You...

What Wells is asserting is the very doctrine of perseverance. When he says, "It's hard truth and ridiculous grace / To be known, fully known, and loved by You..." he's restating a Reformation paradox that Martin Luther first made famous. Luther says that Christians are *simul justus et peccator*; simultaneously justified and sinners. God knows that we are sinners, that sin has left it's dirty fingerprints on every aspect of our being. Because of this, we are not worthy of his love, his grace, or his mercy. And yet, he still justifies us out of his own sovereign will. God's love is unmerited toward us, and yet he loves us nonetheless. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."¹⁵

Here's the "so what" of this very long sermon. I'm not preaching this to force you to become Calvinists. Not even all Calvinists agree on these things. What the Five Points teach us, and what I think is an underestimated contribution from Calvin, is the work of the Holy Spirit. Presbyterians do believe in the Holy Spirit. We might not dance or speak in tongues, but we do

believe that it is the Spirit who is the force behind TULIP. We deeply resonate with Jesus' words, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all."¹⁶ It is the Spirit who first reveals to us our sinfulness. The Spirit endows God's unconditional election. The Spirit brings to pass Christ's particular redemption. The Spirit effectually and irresistibly calls us to grace. And the Spirit preserves and perseveres with us in this journey of the Christian life. This, I believe, is the good news of the Reformation.

Let us pray. O Holy Spirit, heavenly dove, you have descended upon us, the children of God, and you guide as we discern you will for our lives, O God. Thank you, for being with us, for loving us when we are most unlovable. And thank you for the men and women of the Reformation, whose dedication to you, even to the point of death, opened the world's eyes to your steadfast love. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

¹ Romans 7:14-15, 18

² Genesis 2:16-17

³ Job 14:4

⁴ Acts 9:15

⁵ John 3:5-6

⁶ Romans 7:18

⁷ II Thessalonians 2:13

⁸ Malachi 1:2-3

⁹ Romans 9:14-16

¹⁰ Westminster Confession 10:1

¹¹ John 6:64

¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, "A Defense of Calvinism."

¹³ Westminster Confession 9:3, 4

¹⁴ Hebrews 12:28

¹⁵ Romans 5:8

¹⁶ John 6:63