

Salvation by Grace

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

As pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church of Lamar, I cherish and teach the Bible truth that has the sovereignty of God as its foundation. This truth is that God saves sinners in mercy by His grace alone through faith alone. This truth has been greatly misunderstood and neglected in recent times. The human side of salvation has been stressed to the point of overlooking, if not outright denying God's sovereignty in the matter. The fact is the Bible teaches that God has sovereignly predestinated those whom He will save (Ephesians 1:4, 5).

Even though today it is largely maligned, this truth has been taught by a great host of God's servants such as the late Charles H. Spurgeon (Baptist pastor of the great London Tabernacle in the latter half of the nineteenth century). It is not man's opinion; it is Bible truth. However, for reasons not especially clear, this truth has been labeled, "Calvinism." Spurgeon said, "It is a nickname to call it Calvinism, Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else" (sermon, "Christ Crucified").

To clarify this truth, we will briefly examine those Scriptural points that constitute the sovereign-grace gospel. They are summarized by the acrostic TULIP, which, although convenient, has its own problems. While the acrostic may help us remember the distinctives of the sovereign grace gospel,

. . . unfortunately, it has also caused great confusion and much misunderstanding. The problem with acrostics is that the best terms we have for ideas don't always start with letters that will spell neat little words. The acrostic serves well as a memory device, but that is about all (R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, p. 103).

We would also like to make it clear that we are not defending John Calvin's theology or philosophy. He did not invent the five points of TULIP, but, as Spurgeon emphasized, they are "five bright emanations springing from the glorious covenant of our triune God, and illustrating the great doctrine of Christ crucified." We use the acrostic simply to assist us in explaining only one point—God saves sinners. Salvation is not a cooperative effort with God's doing his part and the sinner's doing his. Salvation is all of God.

The force of this [one point] may not be weakened by . . . dividing the achievement of salvation between God and man and making the decisive part man's own, or by soft-peddling the sinner's ability so as to allow him to share the praise of his salvation with the Saviour (J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 130).

Total Depravity

"T" stands for "total depravity," which describes the condition of mankind in sin—that a sinner, by nature, is both unwilling and spiritually unable to respond on his own in repentance and faith to God. Inability does not mean that the sinner has no natural faculties (understanding and will) to respond to the gospel. The sinner's inability lies in the fact that he has a moral nature that is corrupted by sin. Because of this, an unregenerate sinner will never will to be saved. His nature is like a magnet that is naturally attracted to the world while conversely repelled by the things of God. Until the sinner's "polarity" is changed, he cannot and will not be attracted to Christ and salvation. If it were left to the sinner to respond out of his rebellious nature to receive his own salvation, no one would be saved.

Unconditional Election

Therefore, if anyone is going to be saved, God must do the saving. In His sovereign grace, God has chosen to save a great host of sinners, elected by Him "according to His own purpose and grace" (2 Tim 1:9) wholly apart from anything which He foresees in them, such as whether they will believe or how they will live. Grace, by definition, makes salvation the free and unconditional choice of God—the "U" in TULIP.

Limited Atonement

In order to save His elect, God provided for them a Savior who (1) demonstrably lived up to their responsibility to God's holy law and (2) suffered the judgment due to them under the wrath of God because of their God-belittling sin and failure to glorify Him. The satisfaction of judgment, which the

Savior made to God through His sacrifice on the cross with its accompanying intercession, actually secures the salvation of those for whom He was given as a Savior. This view makes Christ's sacrifice a truly substitutionary atonement in that it is a redemption of the elect only.

Rather than "limited atonement" (the "L" in TULIP), the term "particular redemption"—the redemption of His sheep (John 10:11)—would better describe this concept. Unless one believes that all people will eventually be saved (universalism), every Christian believes that the atonement is in some way limited. Most evangelicals believe it is limited in its power to save—that Christ's death is only a potential redemption that becomes effectual when a sinner can be persuaded to accept Christ as his Savior. Calvinists believe that Christ's atonement was limited only in its intent—actually saving only the elect. We do not believe the effects of the death of Christ are potential in any way. "He shall save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21).

Irresistible Grace

The "I" of TULIP stands for "irresistible grace"—the work of God's Spirit whereby the elect are effectually and inwardly called to participate in the salvation which God offers through the gospel. "Irresistible grace" might be better termed "effectual inward calling." This point is the second most resisted point (after particular redemption) because people somehow see irresistible grace as God's coercing sinners against their wills. This interpretation misconstrues the doctrine, for it assumes that some sinners, who are not elect, would wish to be saved while others, who are saved, may not have wanted to be saved. This just is not so. To propose that God coerces sinners against their will would be to accuse God of unrighteousness—an absurd presumption in any theology. Rather, in changing the "polarity" of the sinner's desire by regeneration, God makes it possible for sinners to choose Christ. Those thus "called" are given all the gifts of grace and faith needed for them to respond freely to the gospel. Through the work of the Word of God and the Spirit of God, the elect yield to Christ and salvation willingly, happily, and gratefully. Those not "called" have already exercised their choice for sin and are left to the consequences of it. "Irresistible grace" does not mean that sinners cannot, for a time, resist God. Scripture and experience show otherwise. But God's purpose ultimately always prevails.

Perseverance of the Saints

Salvation results in the elect sinner's becoming a new creature in Christ. The evidence for this work of grace is submissive obedience to the will of God and growing conformity of the child of God to Christ and holiness. Unlike the modification of "perseverance of the saints" to eternal security, which is more of a personal benefit than an evidence of grace, the "perseverance of the saints" stresses the responsibility of the believer to live a holy and godly life by the grace and power of God. This is the "P" of TULIP.

Some have argued that "perseverance of the saints" sounds as if our final salvation rests on our ability to persevere. "[H]e that endureth to the end shall be saved" (Matt 10:22). There are two ways of looking at this verse. (1) Some teach that salvation depends upon one's holding out to the end. (2) We argue that one's holding out to the end is the result of God's gracious enabling of the believer to persevere. Steadfastness in the things of God is the evidence of election, not the cause of it.

The whole work of salvation is thus powerfully and clearly summed up in the "golden chain" of Romans 8:30:

Moreover whom he did predestinate [to be chosen in Christ by His elective love to be like Christ], them he also called [by His effectual inward call through the gospel]: and whom he called, them he also justified [declared righteous by the substitutionary redemptive work of Christ]: and whom he justified, them he also glorified [securing their everlasting acceptance in holiness and righteousness by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and the priestly work of Christ's intercession before the Father's throne].

Each of the five points fits together like pieces of a puzzle to form one beautiful grand whole—the salvation of sinners. It is a work of God's glorious majesty and expresses His wonderful grace. Yet, many today will reject one or more of these pieces because they refuse to relinquish the notion that they must have autonomous "free choice" in salvation. The English Puritan divine, Dr. John Owen, referred to this "free choice" notion as "the Arminian idol." While we do not deny human responsibility we do reject human autonomy. However, most modern evangelicals are more concerned with preserving human

autonomy to upholding the majesty of God's autonomy. The sad result of this "free choice" gospel makes God a mere sentimental deity who is mostly frustrated in His efforts save sinners, because He must gain their cooperation without infringing on their "free will." On the other hand, the Bible exalts God's sovereign majesty and the pure grace of His saving work.

Additional Help

[Click on Scripture Proofs of the "Five Points"](#)

If you are interested in pursuing these truths in greater depth, we recommend the following literature available through our church. Please contact us.

Predestined for Heaven? Yes!, Pastor Jeff Alexander; The Pleasures of God, Dr. John Piper; The Five Points of Calvinism, David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas; Tulip: The Five Points of Calvinism in Light of Scripture, Duane Edward Spencer

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