

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We finished discussing the doctrine of limited atonement in our last session. So, Dr. Spencer, what do you want to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, now that we have finished covering all five of the reformed doctrines represented by the acrostic TULIP, I'd like to show how these doctrines are interrelated and together comprise part of a logically-coherent understanding of the system of theology presented to us in the Bible.

Marc Roby: And we should remind our listeners that TULIP stands for the five reformed doctrines of Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints.

Dr. Spencer: And we should also point out that these may not be the best possible descriptions of the doctrines, but they are commonly used terms. We should also say that these five doctrines do not fully summarize biblical soteriology, they only point to the major points of difference between Reformed and Arminian theology.

But, with all of that said, I want to look at how these doctrines all logically fit together. R.C. Sproul, in his book *What is Reformed Theology?* wrote that "The moral inability of fallen man is the core concept of the doctrine of total depravity or radical corruption. If one embraces this aspect of the T in TULIP, the rest of the acrostic follows by a resistless logic."<sup>1</sup>

Marc Roby: I seem to recall you using that quote before.

Dr. Spencer: I did use part of it, but we didn't go on at that time to show how the doctrines all fit together, which is what I want to do today. If we accept as true the clear biblical teaching that we are born sinful, we do not seek God, we suppress the truth, we are enemies of God and we are spiritually dead in our trespasses and sins, in other words that we are totally depraved, then the other four points of TULIP follow necessarily.

Marc Roby: And the things you just said are all biblical. Not only are we born sinful, but King David wrote, in Psalm 51:5, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me."<sup>2</sup> And Paul wrote in Romans 3:11 that "no one [] seeks God." He also wrote in Romans 1:18 that men "suppress the truth by their wickedness" and in Romans 5:10 that "we were God's enemies" and in Ephesians 2:1 he wrote that we "were dead in [our] transgressions and sins".

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 128

<sup>2</sup> All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

Dr. Spencer: And if we take that as the starting point, the other four doctrines necessarily fall into place. So, let's look at unconditional election first and see how it depends on and fits with total depravity.

**Marc Roby: The alternative to unconditional election is, of course, that God elects, or chooses, whom to save based on some condition, in other words, based on something we do or don't do.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. The standard position taken by most non-Reformed believers, like Arminians, is what is called the prescient view of election. The word prescient simply means to know something beforehand. In other words, this view is based on God's foreknowledge. The idea is that since God knows everything that will ever happen, he looks into the future and sees who will accept his offer of salvation and he then elects those people to be saved.

**Marc Roby: I know that those who hold this view often point to Romans 8:29 where we read that "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."**

Dr. Spencer: That is the proof text that is used, but it doesn't support their contention. Let's first note, as both sides will agree, that it is obviously not just speaking about God knowing someone in the sense we usually use that term because God knows everyone and the phrase "those God foreknew" is being used to identify a specific group of people.

Those who oppose the idea of unconditional election usually say this refers to God's foreknowledge of the faith of some people. But, as John Murray points out in his commentary, "Even if it were granted that 'foreknew' means the foresight of faith, the biblical doctrine of sovereign election is not thereby eliminated or disproven. ... The question would then simply be; whence proceeds this faith which God foresees? And the only biblical answer is that the faith which God foresees is the faith he himself creates".<sup>3</sup> Murray then lists a number of Scriptures to make his point, beginning with the passage in John Chapter 3 where Christ tells Nicodemus that no one can see or enter the kingdom of God unless he has been born again, or born of the water and the spirit. (John 3:3,5)

**Marc Roby: Yes, that's a powerful passage. Dead people don't make themselves come alive. Similarly, it would make no sense to say that I caused myself to be born again.**

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. Murray also cites John 6:44, which we've looked at before. In that verse, Jesus says that "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." The Greek word translated "draws" in that verse is ἐλκῶω (helkuō) and it could also be rendered as drag, it is something that is done to you, not something you do and not just some gentle persuasion or suggestion. And to give just one more of the verses Murray cites, he lists Ephesians 2:8, which says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God". So our salvation comes through faith, it is not from ourselves, it is the gift of God.

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<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997, pg. 316

**Marc Roby: Those verses also clearly support the biblical doctrine of unconditional election.**

Dr. Spencer: They do. And Murray also makes an argument from the Greek grammar that the proper meaning of the term foreknew in Romans 8:29 is really that God foreloved a certain group of people.<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: And because he loved them, he predestinated them to be saved.**

Dr. Spencer: Right. And Martin Luther, in his commentary on Romans goes back one verse and looks at Romans 8:28, which says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Luther notes that “This passage is the foundation on which rests everything that the Apostle says to the end of the chapter; for he means to show that to the elect who are loved of God and who love God, the Holy Spirit makes all things work for good even though they are evil”.<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: And when we read about those who love God, I immediately think of 1 John 4:19 where we read that “We love because he first loved us.”**

Dr. Spencer: That is a great verse to show that if we love God, it is in response to his prior love for us. Romans 8:28 also says that Paul is speaking about people who “have been called according to [God’s] purpose”, which immediately makes me think of Ephesians 1:11, where Paul wrote that “In him”, referring to Jesus Christ, “we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will”.

We could again go through many more Scriptures, but the point is that because man is totally depraved, his election *must* be unconditional. He is incapable of doing anything on which his election could be conditioned.

**Marc Roby: And that brings us to the L in TULIP, limited atonement.**

Dr. Spencer: And since we just spent a number of sessions defending that doctrine I will be very brief here. Remember that all true Christians believe that the atonement is limited in some way since the only alternative is universalism, that everyone will be saved, and no Christian believes that. So, the real question is whether the atonement is limited in its effectiveness or its extent. But, if it is limited in its effectiveness, we have a serious problem.

**Marc Roby: And why is that?**

Dr. Spencer: Because our salvation would then depend, ultimately, on ourselves. If everyone is equally able to respond to the gospel, the difference between a person who is saved and one who is not saved must be found in the people themselves, not in God.

And if that were true, it would give us something to boast about, it would detract from God’s glory, it would mean that Christ was not telling the truth when he said “it is finished” from the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp 316-317

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, *Romans*, pg. 130

cross and it would mean that we are *not* totally depraved. We *would*, in fact, be capable of doing at least one thing that pleases God, namely, choosing to repent and believe.

**Marc Roby:** And doing that would, in fact, be an act of obedience pleasing to God. Because in Acts 17:30 we are told that God “commands all people everywhere to repent.” And in 1 John 3:23 the apostle tells us that God’s command is “to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, to repent and believe would obviously be obedient to those commands and therefore pleasing to God, but in Romans 8:6-8 Paul tells us that “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.” So, clearly it must not be possible for a person to repent and believe until and unless he or she is born again, which is a work that only God can do.

**Marc Roby:** And so we have now seen how total depravity, unconditional election and limited atonement are all inextricably linked together. That brings us to the doctrine of irresistible grace, how is it linked with the other elements of TULIP?

Dr. Spencer: Well, it is linked, again, by the doctrine of total depravity. If we are dead in our transgressions and sins, then we will resist God’s offer of salvation. Dead people don’t accept any offer, not matter how wonderful it is.

**Marc Roby:** That is a powerful argument. It doesn’t take any active effort for a dead person to “resist” an offer of salvation, he doesn’t have to *do* anything. He is dead! And he remains dead.

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true. When Christ commanded Lazarus to come forth from the tomb he did obey and came out. But I can say with absolute certainty that while he obeyed and walked out on his own power, he did not come back to life on his own power! God had to miraculously bring him back to life before he could hear and obey Christ’s command.

**Marc Roby:** And, in the same way, God must bring those who are dead in their sins to life by causing them to be born again. And only then can they obey the gospel call to repent and believe.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. But to use an even stronger biblical statement, we are by nature God’s enemies, we are actively hostile to him. The thought that we could somehow be brought to love God by an offer of grace without having our nature changed first is simply inconceivable. So let me read again a quote I’ve used before because it makes the point so clearly.

**Marc Roby:** Please do.

Dr. Spencer: The great 20th-century theologian John Murray summarized the problem in the following way. “If this is man’s condition in sin, then there can be no pleasure in the will of God. Enmity against God must express itself in opposition to every manifestation of his holy will. How then can we expect that man will answer with delight the call to enter into God’s kingdom of glory and virtue? How can a man dead in trespasses and sins, and at enmity with God, answer a call to the fellowship of the Father and the Son? How can a mind darkened and depraved have

any understanding or appreciation of the treasures of divine grace? How can his will incline to the overtures of God's grace in the gospel?"<sup>6</sup>

**Marc Roby: Yes, I do remember that passage, and I think it is impossible to successfully argue against Murray's logic. Clearly, God's grace must be irresistible or it will not bring about salvation.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And that brings us to the final doctrine in TULIP, the perseverance of the saints. This is again logically connected with the other doctrines. Remember that Christ's atonement is either limited in its effectiveness or its extent. Reformed theology, in agreement with the Bible, says that the atonement is limited in its extent, not its effectiveness. If it were possible for a true Christian to fall away from the faith completely and finally, then we would again have to say that Christ's atonement was not truly effective.

**Marc Roby: I see your point. And we would again have a problem with Christ's statement that "it is finished".**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we would. Reformed, or biblical, theology says we must be born again first, and then we respond in repentance and faith. But if we think about that for a minute, it becomes obvious that we can't fall away from faith completely and finally. If I have been born again, my fundamental nature has been changed. And nothing I do can destroy that change and make my nature go back to the old nature I had before. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

**Marc Roby: And yet, Christians still sin, and sometimes they can sin grievously. Look at King David committing adultery with Bathsheba and then murdering Uriah to try and cover it up. Or Peter denying three times that he even knew Christ.**

Dr. Spencer: Those are the two most prominent examples of true believers falling into terrible sin. But they were both ultimately saved, neither one of them lost his salvation. We must remember the system of biblical doctrines represented by TULIP. We were dead in our sins, enemies of God. But because of his divine, eternal, electing love, not conditioned on anything we would or could ever do, he caused us to be born again and granted us the gift of repentance and faith. We do respond of course, but salvation is, ultimately, a sovereign work of God and his purposes cannot be thwarted by anyone. Christ spoke about the security of those who trust in him in John 10:28-29. He said, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."

**Marc Roby: That is a glorious promise. My security is not based on my strength, but on God's strength.**

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<sup>6</sup> J. Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 169

Dr. Spencer: Which is why Paul wrote to the church in Philippi saying, as we read in Philippians 1:6, that he was “confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

God elected a certain number of people to eternal life, based on his own good pleasure and purposes, not conditioned on anything they can or did do. Then, in time, he causes each of his chosen people to hear the gospel and he regenerates them, giving them a new heart so that they can respond to the gospel in repentance and faith. He then works with them to sanctify them and he guarantees that he will complete the work he begins. That should not make us be complacent or lazy, quite the contrary, it should encourage us to work extra hard to please God as sinners saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Marc Roby: And so we see that the reformed doctrines represented by the acrostic TULIP, Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints all fit together logically.

Dr. Spencer: And they form a part of the biblical doctrine of salvation. In our next session, I want to move on and start looking at the specific steps in the salvation of a believer, called the order of salvation, or *ordo salutis*.

Marc Roby: Very well, I look forward to that. And I’d like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We’ll do our best to answer you.