

“The Distinctives of Reformed Theology: Part I of V”

There are five distinct biblical teachings recovered by Reformers in the seventeenth century that have become known by the acrostic TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Now, TULIP does not summarize Reformed theology, but it does capture important biblical teachings in a simple way. My intent is to explain each of the five teachings for you to gain familiarity with Reformed theology.

The first biblical teaching of Reformed Theology is total depravity. Unfortunately, this is misunderstood as meaning that people are as bad as they can possibly be. That is not true. There is still room for it to get worse. It also does not mean a denial of free will. We are still free to do what we want. The problem is that what we want is not God. Total depravity conveys the biblical teaching that a person cannot take even the smallest steps toward God unless He first intervenes. Psalm 14 says, “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God” (1-3). Paul teaches that the sinner is “dead in... transgressions and sins” (Eph. 2:1-3). Paul doesn’t say that man is well or even sick. He is dead in his relationship to God. We could call this spiritually dead. Still, a person spiritually dead is actively practicing sin: “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature” (2).

Sin corrupts the heart, the mind, and the will. Paul makes this clear in Romans 3:10-11: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.” There are three things to understand in these verses. First, we are unrighteous. We’re playing with Monopoly money when God requires real currency. He requires divine, perfect righteousness. Second, not one of us understands spiritual things. Human wisdom shows itself bankrupt as far as God is concerned: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor. 1:18-21). Third, no one seeks God. While human beings are religious beings, no one unaided by God runs toward Him.

Why is this teaching important? When I picked up my wife’s engagement ring, the seller placed the diamond on black felt. The black felt made the diamond sparkle gloriously. In the same way, total depravity provides the black backdrop for God’s saving grace. In fact, it is the key to grateful living. It prepares one to say with Paul, “Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:24-25). Believers show their gratitude by living for Him. Do you?

Judson Marvel

Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church (PCA), Sierra Vista, AZ

