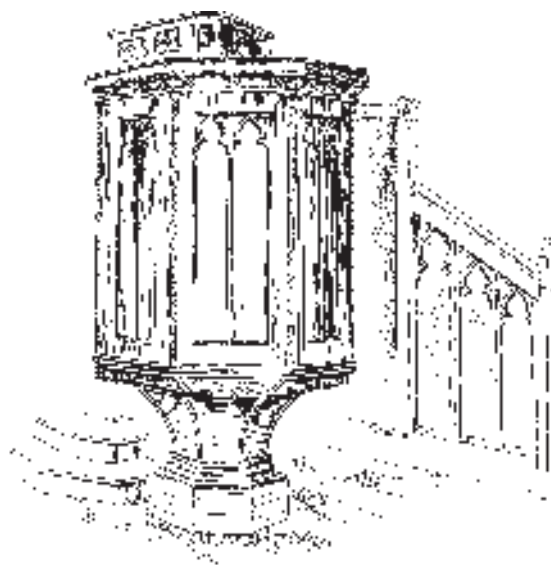


January 24, 2010
Presbyterian Heritage Sunday

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

T.U.L.I.P.

Sermons on the Five Points of Calvinism

T. = Total Depravity

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Romans 17:14-25

Several years ago the *New York Times* carried a report of an interview with novelist and short-story writer Hugh Nissenson, author of *The Elephant and My Jewish Problem*. Nissenson was born of Jewish parents and raised in New York City. At the age of 28 he was sent by *Commentary* magazine to cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. At the time he was a believing Jew. But, at the trial he confronted the horrible details of the Holocaust and the brutal treatment of Jews by Nazis in Germany and Poland and in occupied France. Day after day an unending succession of eye witnesses paraded before him the atrocities that were heaped on his people. Nissenson says, "My faith in a personal God was dramatically eroded and eventually collapsed. The sense of horror, of being aware of what human beings are capable of doing to one another, marked me and changed the way I look at the human condition and the human race." He concluded by saying, "One of the things I now address again and again is the idea of the immense component of evil—of radical evil—in the human mind."

There are many persons who, like Nissenson, were surprised and shocked into disbelief by the Holocaust, and by other events such as the revelation of Stalin's calculated starvation of millions of

Ukrainians or the cold-blooded murder of 4500 Polish officers at Katyn in 1940 or the Cambodian holocaust of Pol Pot or the African atrocities of Idi Amin or the more recent Rwandan genocide. Of course a little closer to home is 9/11, but the death toll on that fateful day pales in comparison to the other examples.

The news of these unbelievable cruelties, in what they thought was a civilized world, devastates many persons just as it did Nissenson. We are shocked to discover that, when you scratch the surface of civilized humanity, you find barbarians.

So, the doctrine of human depravity, neglected for so long, deserves to be dusted off and examined again. One cannot but wonder whether if Hugh Nissenson had had a firm grip on this doctrine, his faith might have survived the Eichmann trial. One who holds this doctrine will always be saddened, but never surprised, by the evils of which human beings are capable.

In simplest language the doctrine of “total depravity” is this: *Human nature has been and is utterly corrupted by sin so that individuals are totally incapable of doing anything to accomplish their salvation.* The doctrine does not mean that we are totally evil. It does not declare that there is no good at all in people. There is good in everybody. Most, if not all, people are capable of doing thoughtful and helpful things. In the soul of each of us there remains what Augustine called “vestiges of God.”

Nor does the doctrine declare that people are as bad as they might be. Some persons are more degenerate than others, but no one is as evil as he could be. Even Adolf Hitler loved little children. No soul embraces every sin.

The doctrine does not declare that men and women are devoid of all admirable features. But the doctrine does declare that all human beings are “depraved,” which according to the dictionary means “marked by corruption and evil.” This condition is inherited from Adam. It is part of our original equipment and not something that we learn after we get into the world. We are tainted by sin from birth; our souls came to us stained—infected by a deadly virus. Further the doctrine declares that this depravity is total, meaning that it affects every department of our nature: intellect, emotions, will. A deadly virus is lodged in every organ of our soul: in our thinking, our feeling, our doing. And, this malignant disease of the soul renders us totally incapable of achieving salvation or peace without God’s grace.

Those who deny this doctrine hold that mankind is basically good, but misguided—that human beings by nature are quite decent, but that the environment or the culture impose circumstances on them that lead them to unfortunate responses. This position holds that, if we would only give persons a fair chance, some good examples, enough food and clothing, a little education—then the basic goodness of every human being would manifest itself and people would live in peace with one another and with God.

Over against this naive view of human nature, which is held by many Christians, the Reformed faith has historically declared the doctrine of total depravity—that every element of human nature is so corrupted by sin that no one can know salvation except by the transforming grace of God.

Certainly, the Bible supports this Calvinist teaching. Jeremiah said, "The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked." (17:9) The Psalmist said, "Behold I was shaped in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me." (51:5) The Message Bible gives a better translation of that verse: "I've been out of step with you for a long time, in the wrong since before I was born." Jesus acknowledged that men and women are devoid of the love which God requires. He said to the Pharisees, "I know you; you have not the love of God in yourselves," (John 5:42) and to His disciples He said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

But, the apostle Paul, perhaps because he was so conscious of his own sin, talked more about human depravity than any other biblical writer. Paul spoke of us as being "dead through the trespasses and sin" (Eph. 2:1); he said that we are "lovers of self rather than lovers of God" (2 Tim.3:4) and he spoke of being cleansed from "every defilement of body and of spirit." (2 Cor. 7:1)

But Paul's most revealing passage is in the seventh chapter of Romans where he describes so aptly his own and every person's depravity, saying:

What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise... I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me join in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does.

But, the doctrine of total depravity does not rest on a few scattered texts. It is basic to the central theme of the Scriptures, which is the Grace of God. The Bible is the book of God's grace. If we can save ourselves, God's grace is unnecessary.

recall a *New Yorker* cartoon a while back, when transactional analysis was all the rage. You remember the book *I'm OK, You're OK*, by Thomas A. Harris, don't you? The cartoon showed Christ on the cross with a couple of folks at the foot of the cross. The caption read, "If I'm OK and you're OK what am I doing up here?"

I can tell I still haven't convinced some of you. So, let's look at how Calvin's doctrine may help your own theology.

First, this doctrine of total depravity reminds believers that the root cause of the human predicament is the corruption of human nature and that the only real solution for that is the grace of God. It helps us to remember that the church's first priority is to bring people to know the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Any church or denomination that long neglects this doctrine will eventually find that her program priorities have become distorted.

Second, a proper understanding of this doctrine prepares the believer to deal with the immense component of radical evil in human beings whenever he or she finds it. If this had been Hugh Nissenson's doctrine of humanity, he should not have lost his faith at the Eichmann trial. One who knows that there is no bottom to the depth of evil of which men and women are capable will be saddened but never surprised at the depth of evil to which humanity does sometimes fall. Also, knowledge of this doctrine prevents one from being devastated when someone she admires is revealed to have feet of clay.

Third, this doctrine leads one to a deep distrust of all human power, because Lord Acton was right, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." If our founding fathers and mothers hadn't believed in the doctrine of total depravity they would have created a different kind of government.

Trained at Princeton by a staunch Calvinist, James Madison insisted on inserting into the structures of the American government a system of checks and balances on individual and governmental power. Because of the corruption of human nature, no one is to be trusted with too much power. Because of human depravity all human power corrupts the user—political power, economic power, the power of a gun, the power of money; even ecclesiastical power corrupts the user. No one knows this better than the holders of this doctrine. One of the main purposes of human governments and laws is to curb human depravity.

Finally, the doctrine leads the believer to recognize and confess that all his/her own actions, without exception, spring from mixed motives. Everything we think or do or say is corrupted by sin. Whatever the deed, sin is a part of it.

There you have it - Calvin's doctrine of total depravity. It may not be pretty, but it does make a lot of sense.

Let us, therefore, acknowledge our own sinfulness—our propensity to sin; let us confess that we are absolutely incapable of saving ourselves from sin's grip, and so let us throw ourselves on the grace of God made known in Jesus Christ—for apart from Him we can do nothing.

And, let us say every day with the apostle Paul: "Thanks be to God who is giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

This sermon has drawn heavily on the following resources:

- *T.U.L.I.P.* By Ben Lacy Rose
- *The Five Points of Calvinism* by David N. Steele
- *John Calvin* by William Stacy Johnson
- *Calvin: for Armchair Theologians* by Christopher Elwood
- *The Christian Life* by John Calvin, edited by John H. Leith