

Why We Like Tulips

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What is it that makes a man Christian? Is he just born Christian rather than, say, Muslim? Is it that he lives in a country which is predominantly “Christian”? Or maybe it is simply because his parents were Christian. Or is it more personal? Perhaps he is a Christian simply by virtue of attending a “Christian” church and participates in those liturgies which are distinctively Christian.

These are all popular answers to the question; but to anyone who knows even the least about the Bible, there is more to it than that. Much more. Christianity is a religion of faith — vital, personal faith. A “Christian” is a person of faith.

But it is not just any kind of faith. It is faith *in Jesus Christ*, God the Son. A man or woman is a Christian man or woman by faith in *Him*. This is what John meant when he said, “He that believes on the Son has everlasting life, and he that does not believe on the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36). Christ is the focal point of a Christian’s faith. A Christian is one who, among other things, recognizes that only Jesus can save him. Jesus, after all, is the only one who could live a perfect life according to God’s demands. Only Jesus could offer a sacrifice for sin and thereby pay the penalty of our sin. In His life and death, He did all that God required of *us*, and thereby He is the only savior. A Christian recognizes this and so trusts *Him* accordingly. Jesus Christ is the only hope.

But where does that faith come from? How is it we come to believe this about Christ and rest in Him alone for salvation? Was it merely an intellectual decision? Did we simply look at the situation, evaluate it, and come to the conclusion that we should trust Him or perish? And if so, why don’t so many more intelligent people believe the same? What is it that makes the difference between those who believe and those who do not?

To put the question another way, do we trace the origin of our faith back to ourselves or to God? Is *He* the originating cause of our faith, or are *we*?

This question introduces us to a very old theological and philosophical controversy. Is our will free? And if it is, how free is God’s will? Is God sovereign? And if so, then is man nothing more than one of God’s toy robots?

Well, I say this is a long-debated question, but as it relates to salvation the question is extremely important. To whom do we look if we would be saved? Does it lie within us to do what is necessary? Can we honestly direct men to look to themselves for that which God requires of them?

The Bible, throughout, argues and declares this wonderfully good news: “God saves sinners!” (e.g., Jonah 2:9). Now be careful. That little statement is fuller than you might at first recognize. The implications are immense. “Of course!” you might think. “Of course God saves sinners. We’re all sinners, and God is good enough to allow us into heaven anyway! We must try to honor Him, make a good attempt at living a decent life, and of course believe in Him, and He saves us!” This is precisely how many people talk. But this is not at all what the Bible means when it declares that “God saves sinners.” It is not at all that *we* do something which He then ratifies. *God* saves sinners. *He* does it, and He does it all by Himself. It is *His* doing from beginning to end (Philippians 1:6). And it is *sinners* he saves, not those who have been “good enough” or those whose will is “free” and good enough to first make right choices (Philippians 2:13). *God* saves *sinners* — He rescues those who cannot rescue themselves. This is the message of the Gospel.

So if you are a true Christian, one who is trusting Christ for salvation, you have God to thank for it. Not yourself. *He* “began this good work in you” (Philippians 1:6).

Throughout the centuries many have confused this simple teaching. By adding ideas of human merit and the like, more and more of “us” has been added to the equation and less and less of “God.”

To correct this error, Dutch theologians in the 17th century met to formulate and articulate this truth that “God saves sinners.” They formulated their teaching into five simple points (with long explanations, of course!).

First, they explained that the Bible teaches us that man is *totally depraved*. Now by that they did not mean that every man or woman is as bad as he or she can possibly be. No, they meant that by ourselves we all are as *bad off* as we can possibly be. That is, we have all sinned (Romans 3:23), and by our sin we deserve the punishment of God against sin, which is condemnation (Romans 6:23). Moreover, sin has so affected us that, left to ourselves, we will always continue on sinning and never look to God for salvation (John 3:19-20; John 6:44; Romans 3:11). Now clearly, if a man is a sinner deserving of condemnation and will never “seek God” and His mercy, then he is obviously as bad off as he can possibly be. Left to himself he will continue on his way to hell. This is what is meant by “total depravity.”

Next, then, these theologians pointed out that God did not leave us all in that miserable condition. Rather than leaving humanity to itself, He chose a people whom He would save. Now again, no one deserved this favor. God did not owe it to anyone to save anyone. But of His mercy He chose to save some anyway. This teaching is called “unconditional election.” The Bible teaches that God “chose” or “elected” some to salvation (e.g., Romans 8:28-30; Romans 9:16; Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13). God obviously did not make this choice because anyone deserved it; no one deserved anything from Him but condemnation. There were no “conditions” attached, for the simple reason that there were no conditions which any of us would or could have met — we are totally depraved. His choice was unconditional. This is precisely what makes God’s grace so “amazing.” If God had said, “I’ll choose you if you first choose me!” — that would not be “amazing grace.” God’s grace in election is not at all like that. Rather He says, as Jesus said, “You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you” (John 15:16). Now clearly, we must make a choice; we must “believe.” These disciples had, in fact, chosen to follow Jesus! And Jesus does not deny that. He simply emphasizes this basic truth: “It was not your choice of me that determined my choice of you. Rather, it was my choice of you that determined your choice of me.” Put another way, God’s choice is unconditional. If it were otherwise, no one would be saved.

But it is not enough for God simply to choose us. That problem of our condemnation remains. Now it is a problem which modern religion overlooks. But it is a problem which God cannot overlook; His justice demands satisfaction. But how can we be saved if we must be condemned? There is only one way, and that is to find a willing substitute who will take our condemnation for us. But that substitute must not only be willing, he must be *able and qualified* to take our place in judgment. That is, he must be one who does not deserve the condemnation himself. He must himself be sinless. Any candidates? Who is there that is qualified to die under God’s judgment *in place of sinners*? Of course, it is Jesus only. And this is just the point: He died in the place of sinners; and taking their place in judgment they, in turn, go free.

Now we know that the Bible also teaches that not all will be saved. There is a hell, and it will be populated with unbelievers. So the question which arises is this: “For whom, then, did Christ die?” To be sure, being the Son of God, His death was infinite in value, sufficient to save everyone everywhere! But whom did He intend to save by dying? His answer: “I am the good Shepherd; the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Indeed, it was “the Father’s will” for Him to come for this very purpose, to save those whom the Father had chosen (John 6:37-39). Those for whom Christ died cannot be condemned (Romans 8:34) but must receive all of the blessings that flow from His atoning work (Romans 8:32). For this reason, those old theologians spoke of “limited atonement.” Christ’s atoning work was valuable enough for all, unlimited in sufficiency. But it was limited *in its design*; Christ died with the *intention* of saving God’s elect. He died for the purpose of saving “His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

But *will they* be saved? These whom God has chosen and for whom Christ died, will they really be saved? All of them? Might not some resist God’s call and continue on forever in their sin and unbelief? “No,” Jesus says: “All whom the Father gives me shall come to me” (John 6:37). Not “most of them” and not “might” come. “They *all shall* come!” God’s grace to them will prove irresistible. He will overcome their natural disposition to resist, and His overtures of love and mercy will not be unrequited. Why? Because they are sensible enough to see a good deal? No, but because Christ has secured these blessings for them

in His death (Romans 8:32), and they cannot but be saved. O sure, they may well resist at first and perhaps for a while. They like all others are “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). But God in mercy will bring them to life, and seeing their desperate condition they willingly come running “in the day of His power” (Psalm 110:3). Those whom God has chosen to save, He will save.

But having come, might they not fall away? Might not some of them become lost again? “No again!” Jesus says: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish” (John 10:27-28). Remember, Christ has secured in His death exactly every blessing of salvation (Romans 8:32), including their perseverance, or continuance, in faith. They will continue and persevere in this salvation but not because they are so good or strong, but because *God saves sinners*. He does for us all that is necessary for salvation. He accomplishes our salvation fully. He does the work, from beginning to end (Philippians 1:6).

In this way, the Bible shows us that God saves sinners. This is the “good news” of the Christian gospel. It is a wonderful message indeed, and it is our only hope.

But what does all this have to do with tulips? Well it works like this. We have outlined five major points of theology, taught plainly in the Bible and articulated later by Dutch theologians. It just so happens that the Dutch flower is the tulip, and the doctrines, in review, are as follows.

Total Depravity

Unconditional Election

Limited Atonement

Irresistible Grace

Perseverance of the Saints

And there you have it, a very biblical, gospel flower! And these are the doctrines we believe, love, and preach at our church. We invite you to come along with us as we together learn more and more of this gracious God who saves sinners in His Son, Jesus Christ. This is why we are here, and this is what we have to say.