Total Inability / Total Depravity

Total inability, also known as total depravity, is the first of the five points of Calvinism. The five points are described using the acrostic TULIP: T- Total inability/depravity; U- Unconditional election; L- Limited atonement/particular redemption; I- Irresistible grace/efficacious call of the Spirit; and P- Perseverance of the saints. Below is a definition of total inability and, beside it, a description of the Arminian counterpoint known as free will/human ability:*

Calvinism	Arminianism
Total Inability / Total Depravity	**Free Will / Human Ability**
Because of the fall, man is unable of himself to savingly believe the gospel. The sinner is dead, blind, and deaf to the things of God; his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt. His will is not free, it is in bondage to his evil nature, therefore, he will not - indeed he cannot - choose good over evil in the spiritual realm. Consequently, it takes much more than the Spirit's assistance to bring a sinner to Christ - it takes regeneration by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature. Faith is not something man contributes to salvation but is itself a part of God's gift of salvation - it is God's gift to the sinner, not the sinner's gift to God.	Although human nature was seriously affected by the fall, man has not been left in a state of total spiritual helplessness. God graciously enables every sinner to repent and believe, but He does not interfere with man's freedom. Each sinner possesses a free will, and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it. Man's freedom consists of his ability to choose good over evil in spiritual matters; his will is not enslaved to his sinful nature. The sinner has the power to either cooperate with God's Spirit and be regenerated or resist God's grace and perish. The lost sinner needs the Spirit's assistance, but he does not have to be regenerated by the Spirit before he can believe, for faith is man's act and precedes the new birth. Faith is the sinner's gift to God; it is man's contribution to salvation.

Key similarities:

- All people are sinners (Ps. 143:2; Rom. 3:10, 23; 1 John 1:8).
- All unbelievers are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1); “natural” men and women devoid of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14); blinded by Satan to the light of the gospel (2 Cor. 4:3-4); in captivity to Satan (2 Tim. 2:26); alienated from God (Eph. 4:18); enemies of God (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21); in spiritual darkness (Col. 1:13-14; 1 Peter 2:9); and condemned (John 3:18).
- Apart from the finished work of Christ and the initiative of the Father and Holy Spirit in drawing unbelievers to the Jesus, no one could be saved (John 6:44, 16:7-11).

* From *The Five Points of CALVINISM - Defined, Defended, Documented* by David N. Steele and Curtis Thomas.

Key differences:

- Calvinism teaches that regeneration *precedes* justification – in fact, regeneration is the work of God that results in saving faith. Arminianism teaches that regeneration and justification happen at the same time as a result of man's faith in Jesus Christ.
- Calvinism teaches that the Holy Spirit regenerates the elect, leading them irresistibly to faith in Christ. Arminianism teaches that the Holy Spirit regenerates the elect in response to their free choice to receive Christ.
- Calvinism teaches that unbelievers do not (and cannot) have the desire or the faith to receive Christ unless they are first regenerated; their will is in bondage to their sin nature. Arminianism teaches that unbelievers do possess the ability to receive Christ but may resist the convicting power of the Holy Spirit; their will is not enslaved to their sin nature.
- Calvinism stresses the work of God apart from human cooperation in salvation. Arminianism stresses the cooperation of people with God in salvation.

What is regeneration?

Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit imparting spiritual life to those who are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). While the Greek word *palingenesia* appears only twice in the New Testament (Matt. 19:28 and Titus 3:5), the doctrine of the "new birth" is clearly taught in Scripture. In Matt. 19:28, Jesus uses the term to refer to the future Messianic age, when the fallen creation is restored and "all things (are put) in subjection under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:27 NASB; see also Acts 3:21; Rom. 8:18-23; Rev. 21:1). In Titus 3:5, Paul uses *palingenesia* in the individual sense to denote the change of heart spoken of elsewhere in Scripture as passing from death to life (1 John 3:14); becoming a new creature in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17); being born again or born from above (John 3:3); and being made alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:5). This change is ascribed to the Holy Spirit and originates with God (John 1:12-13; 1 John 2:29, 5:1,4). Scripture affirms the necessity of regeneration (John 3:3, 6:63; Rom. 8:9).

The apostle Peter uses the terms "times of refreshing" (Acts 3:19) and "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21) to describe the completion of God's plan for the whole creation (see also 2 Peter 3:13). Still, he refers plainly to the regeneration of individuals (1 Peter 1:3), calling the regenerated "newborn babies" (1 Peter 2:2) and emphasizing the basis of their regeneration – "the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). Finally, Peter compares the purifying work of regeneration to the cleansing by water God performed on the human race in the flood of Noah (1 Peter 3:20-21).

But is regeneration a prerequisite for justification? That is, must God regenerate the elect so that they will believe and repent, resulting in justification? If so, then the human will must truly be in bondage to the sin nature, as many (not all) Calvinists maintain. But in no place does the Bible clearly state this. Rather, the scriptures seem to support the view that regeneration – as well as justification, sanctification and glorification – is the gracious work of God in the life of the unbeliever who responds in faith to the gospel message and the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. We will explore this issue in more detail later in this study.

Next Week: T-U-L-I-P – Unconditional Election

Copyright 2008 by Rob Phillips