

Dispensationalism and TULIP – Unconditional Election

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Introduction

My goal here is the same as in the post on Total Depravity. I want to ask whether a Dispensational Theology built on its own principles can endorse the 5 points of Calvinism, especially as they are defined by Reformed theologians themselves in their classic works. I am not concerned with a full scale exposition of the doctrine of election. I am only asking whether certain expositions sit within the hermeneutical *modus operandi* of dispensationalism.

Of all the five points of Calvinism, possibly this one has the least baggage attached to it. That is, as long as we include the proviso that the doctrine of election should never be “ascertained” by snooping around in the secret decrees of God *prior to laying out the Bible’s teaching on salvation!* Calvin got that, Beza didn’t.

1. Election, Yes; Double Predestination, No

Most dispensationalists would feel comfortable with the following declaration:

Before the world was made, God’s eternal, immutable purpose, which originated in the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, moved Him to choose (or to elect), in Christ, certain of mankind to everlasting glory. Out of His mere free grace and love He predestinated these chosen ones to life, although there was nothing in them to cause Him to choose them. Rom. 8:30; 9:13, 16; Eph. 1:4, 9,11; 1 Thess. 5:9; 2 Tim. 1:9. – *A Faith to Confess: The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, “God’s Decree,” Chapter 3. 5, (21).

They would not, however, feel quite as comfortable with this statement:

The Reformed Faith has held to the existence of an eternal, divine decree which, antecedently to any difference or desert in men themselves, separates the human race into two portions and ordains one to everlasting life and the other to everlasting death. – Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, P & R, 1976, 83

This is the teaching known as “double predestination” and is taught by most five point Calvinists and many of the confessions they endorse (Boettner himself appeals to the Westminster Confession). There is no passage in Scripture that I am aware of that teaches that God “ordains...[the non-elect] to everlasting death” in eternity past. I read that God created hell for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41), not, it would seem, with man originally in view. This ought to have put paid to speculations about the order of the decrees, at least until the data of soteriology was considered.

I do not see how anyone using the hermeneutics of dispensationalism can agree with double predestination. For instance, this would mean that verses such as 2 Peter 3:9; Matthew 23:37 and Ezekiel 33:11 would have to be interpreted with a hermeneutics *other* than a plain-sense one

(since these verses certainly make sense when taken at face value, but cannot be taken as such by someone bent on teaching a decree of reprobation). This other hermeneutics would need to be qualified by *theological* presuppositions, which would put it at variance with the hermeneutics of DT (in fact, all the new interpretations of these verses would have to be classified as C4's). And beating a retreat to Romans 9 does no good unless one is intent on forgetting Paul's argument about the sinner in Romans 1.

Any dogma which forces its devotees to disengage themselves from plain verses must be held up to suspicion – by a dispensationalist. In just the same way as DT's object to the false construal of the Church as "New Israel", so they ought to object to the doctrine of double predestination taught by men like Boettner, Pink, Sproul and other 5 pointers.

2. Dordt and the Election of the People of God

Likewise no DT could endorse this statement from the Canons of Dort:

FIRST HEAD: ARTICLE 8. There are not various decrees of election, but one and the same decree respecting all those who shall be saved, both under the Old and New Testament; since the Scripture declares the good pleasure, purpose, and counsel of the divine will to be one, according to which He has chosen us from eternity, both to grace and to glory, to salvation and to the way of salvation, which He has ordained that we should walk therein (Eph 1:4, 5; 2:10).

This article, taken with **Article 9** makes it clear that Dort believed that there is just *one people of God*. Acceptance of these Articles is thus implicit rejection of the Israel/Church dichotomy which is so central to DT! What is more, where does Scripture talk about "the covenant of grace"? (I realize Chafer and Walvoord signed the Westminster Confession, but they really had no place for the covenant of grace and basically muted it so much it could no longer service any theology).

True plain sense hermeneutics does not yield the covenant of grace. In fact, it yields several vital biblical covenants which must be heard in full if one is concerned with literal interpretation. Just as plain-sense interpretation ought to have made Chafer a baptist (despite his referrals to Dale's work on infant baptism, one cannot discover it through plain sense hermeneutics), so the same approach would reveal quickly that belief in "the covenant of grace" does not gel with DT. This means the 1689 Second London (Baptist) Confession is *out* for a dispensationalist (see e.g., Chs.7, 14, 15, 17. Ch. 7 also refers to "the covenant of redemption", while Ch. 20 speaks of "the covenant of works").

3. Dordt, the Covenant of Grace, and Infant Salvation

So far I have tried to show that double predestination and "the covenant of grace," (CoG) which figure so largely in Reformed discussions of unconditional election, do not comport with any possible DT understanding of the doctrine. Next we see what the CoG does in regard to a related matter; the matter of infant salvation. We must explore these areas a bit because once one accepts the definitions of election proffered by the Reformed community these issues arise.

Here again is Dordrecht:

FIRST HEAD: ARTICLE 17. Since we are to judge of the will of God from His Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they together with the parents are comprehended, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom it pleases God to call out of this life in their infancy(*Gen 17:7; Acts 2:39; 1 Cor 7:14*).

How could any dispensationalist assent to this? How could these statements be proven from plain-sense hermeneutics? Again, where do we find the Covenant of Grace in Scripture, and where did it get such hermeneutical clout? With what kind of hermeneutics do we extract it from the Bible? And if we affirm such a “covenant”, let it be admitted that we have handed our objectors a powerful weapon to ruin us with!

Along with its demand for just one people of God (the Church) from Adam to the Second Advent, the CoG houses awkward implications for the issue of infant salvation. Look again at this reference to elect infants. The Canons seem to give a clear answer to the question, ‘Are all infants that die young elect? They answer, ‘only those of godly believing parents.’ (Boettner quotes the Westminster Confession to the same effect). Where is *that* declared in the Bible? What dispensationalist can produce clear texts in its defense?

4. The Assent of God’s “Wills”

Furthermore, in employing 2 Peter 3:9 or Matthew 23:36 it is important to realize that the dispensationalist cannot have the “two wills” of God pointing in opposite directions; one revealed will saying “Yes” to the non-elect and the other secret will saying “No.” The dispensationalist doctrine of election must take up these kinds of texts in their plain sense and formulate election with their “hermeneutical consent.” If a set of passages state that God wills the salvation of all men (e.g. Jn 3:16-17; 1 Jn. 2:2; 4:14), then *that* is what He wills. If all men do not get saved because God has willed the final salvation of only the elect (e.g. Acts 13:48; Jn. 6:44; 2 Thess. 2:13), then *that* is what God has done! These propositions will have to be harmonized by light thrown upon them from other texts (beyond my purpose here, but Rom. 1 plays a large part). The first thing would of course be to recognize that even though God is not stopping anyone from coming to Him, He has chosen to bring to salvation only those chosen “in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). This requires that we interpret the “two wills” differently. Nevertheless, we do not reduce the will for all to be saved to the level of some innocuous sentiment in God for the non-elect in this life. We admit that we do not know why God elected some sinners but yet wants all to be saved. Provided we have dismissed the charge of contradiction we have done about as much as we can (see below).

We should also note that dispensationalists need to take care not to use texts which relate to sanctification of the saints to *ground* unconditional election (e.g. Rom. 8:28-30, in which Paul has the believer’s final glory in mind). These passages might have something to say, but they are scarcely decisive.

4. The Sinner Will Not Come

One of the crucial matters to get a handle on is the responsibility of the sinner to accept Christ. In line with something I read in Van Til once I developed the following aphorism:

“It is not that the sinner won’t come to God because he cannot; but he cannot come to Christ because he will not.”

What this approach does is summarize nicely the Bible’s teaching on human responsibility while showing how God can justly elect some while leaving others to their rightful condemnation. If we reverse this aphorism and start teaching a sinner won’t come to God because he cannot come to God, then we are in the soup. For then we must import once more the mantra that “regeneration precedes faith.” This teaching, which is highly questionable on a number of fronts (e.g., 1. no passage says it; 2. some passages strongly imply just the opposite; 3. this would cause a theological difficulty with God giving eternal life (regeneration) to a sinner before he has been justified and declared righteous; and, 4. even a logical order creates a contradiction between God’s thoughts and God’s Words).

Verses like 1 Pet. 5:9; 2 Pet. 3:9 and Matt. 23:36, not to mention Jn. 1:12-13; 3:3, 5, 16-17, must be allowed to speak with a their own voice without being drowned out by the concerns of our adopted theologies. If they are not allowed to say what they say, what is that but a tacit admission of the interpreter that he is employing theological hermeneutics? And if that is so then no dispensationalist who does it can argue anymore that they use one consistent set of hermeneutics.

A theology which involves a person in backing off the declarations of plain scriptures for the all too apparent reason that these verses clash with that chosen theology is a theology in violation of its biblical permit.

For the record, I do think, e.g., 2 Thess. 2:13 requires us to see that God’s election is prior to our decision. Acts 13:48 (*tasso* – to “put in order or appoint or even enroll”), Rom. 16:13, Acts 18:10, 1 Pet. 1:2, 2 Tim. 1:9, Tit. 1:1 also encourage this conclusion. If there is a condition we cannot meet the condition (belief). Hence, election certainly presupposes total depravity, but *not* regeneration before faith. And the hermeneutics owned by dispensationalists; the same hermeneutics that reveals a clear distinction between Israel and the Church; the same consistently applied hermeneutics which excludes infant baptism, will not support aspects of the doctrine of election espoused by 5 Point Calvinists.