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THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

In politics we are often warned of the slippery slope. In logic it is (usually) a fallacy that says that if something happens, then something bad will be the ultimate result. If President Trump can stack the Supreme Court his way, then the conservatives on the court will overturn *Roe v. Wade* (even though that is highly unlikely). Speaking of that case, when it became the established law of the land people said that if we could kill the preborn, soon they will say that we can kill those less than a week old, or even authorize the blanket killing of seniors. President Trump and others have used the slippery slope fallacy to claim that once we start pulling down statues of Confederate heroes, we will soon be pulling down statues of our founding fathers. An even older use of the slippery slope was the Luddite belief that machines would ultimately take all human jobs away from us, thus destroying the economy. On the other hand, it was not a fallacy when people said that letting Hitler walk into Poland and Austria unopposed would result in him trying to take over all of Europe. Invoking the slippery slope is not limited to politics, but can also be found in the church.

Recently I was in a discussion about the Lord's Supper. In the churches of Christ, the tradition is for a group of men to come forward to pass the trays with the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine after prayers, usually by one or two of the men serving; then the trays are passed along the rows of congregants. As part of the discussion, the idea came up that there might be nothing wrong with women helping pass the trays (since women pass them to the next person in the pews) as long as they aren't the ones saying the prayers. This condition is based on 1 Corinthians 14:34 ("Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak.") and 1 Timothy 2:12 ("But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.") One of the elders was in the discussion and invoked the slippery slope: if women take that role, then eventually some will not object if they say the prayers, and then they will want to preach. In this case the slippery slope may not be a fallacy, as other congregations have gone down that slope. It could be a fallacious argument, though, unless it can be shown that the first cause was women passing trays for the Lord's Supper.

The churches of Christ are famous as one of at least three groups that do not use musical instruments other than the human voice in the assembly. (Two other prominent groups are the Eastern Orthodox and certain Baptists.) This is based on history (no instruments were used in Christian assemblies for several hundred years) and scripture. "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." (Eph 5:19, specifying the human voice and will as the acceptable instrument) Some congregations that insist on being non-instrumental may have recorded music (*a capella* only) playing over the sound system before the formal worship begins. Others use recordings (sometimes *a capella*, sometimes with instrumental background) during the assembly to help teach new songs. Some object to these practices, saying that they are the head of the slippery slope to using "mechanical instruments of music" in worship. The argument in favor of the use of these recordings is that they help teach the congregation new songs. Interestingly, that just proves the slippery slope, because instruments in the Roman Catholic church were supposedly originally only used for choir practice, and then moved into the mass because it helped the choir. On the other hand, the use of recordings to teach songs is not the top of the slippery slope. Because these recordings are indeed "mechanical instruments of music," those who use them are already down the slope; they may just not realize it.

Logically, the slippery slope may be considered a fallacy. In practice, as well, it is most often used to scare with no real basis in fact. Just as one may drive a curvy mountain road and not fall off, occasionally somebody does go over the side. The slippery slope argument may be used to scare, but every now and then it has basis in fact.

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TOTAL DEPRAVITY

This is the first of a series of articles about Calvinist doctrines commonly called by the acronym TULIP. It should be noted that even followers of Calvin use that mnemonic. The five points are: Total depravity; Unconditional election; Limited Atonement; Irresistible grace; and, Perseverance of the saints. While these are considered distinct doctrines, nevertheless there is some overlap between them. Nor is it simply the acronym that gives them their order, since each builds on the previous doctrines. In each article, the Calvinist position will be given, using quotes from their believers, as is only fair. Then the biblical position will be given to support or refute each doctrine.

In 1956, Patty McCormack was nominated for an Academy Award for her role in the movie *The Bad Seed*. In the movie, her character's mother (Nancy Kelly, also Oscar nominated) suspects, correctly, that she is a psychopathic killer. As the movie's title indicates, she is considered a "bad seed." Since the mother was the daughter of a serial killer, she suspects that her daughter has inherited her murderous tendencies from her. Freudians might give an interpretation that the mother was correct, but that it was not necessarily genetic. Catholics

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might attribute it to the doctrine of Original Sin. While Calvinists reject much in Catholic doctrine, they accept Original Sin, calling it Total Depravity. Thus the "bad seed" is an extreme example of the state of all mankind.

Total Depravity

In the late 300s, Pelagius posited the doctrine of free will. In this he did not differ from what had been orthodox doctrine to that time. Where Pelagius went wrong was that he was accused (perhaps falsely) of saying that because man had free will, he could be saved by choosing to do good and not to sin. This was interpreted as meaning that mankind could save themselves through their own deeds. Augustine (upon whose writings much of Calvin's doctrine was based) went to the other extreme, saying that while Adam was created perfect, after the Fall mankind inherited sin and could do nothing of their own will to prevent sin. The Council of Carthage in 418, called by Augustine, condemned Pelagius as a heretic and codified Augustinian doctrine (including the necessity of baptism of infants).

John Calvin held that the Catholic Church had gotten away from the doctrines solidified by the Council of Carthage. He proposed that "our nature is not only devoid of all goodness, but is so prolific in all kinds of evil, that it can never be idle." (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. I, Bk. II, Chap. 1, Para. 8) Accepting the doctrine of Original Sin, he declares that man is, by his corrupted nature after the Fall, totally depraved. "That is what death is. Death and total depravity are synonymous." (Herman Hanko, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, © 1976, Chapter 1)

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned; even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord," (Rom. 5:19–21)

If salvation comes through the grace of God by Jesus Christ, the argument goes, then sin and death come from Adam in a similar way. Or conversely, as Calvin expresses it, if sin and death come by imitation of Adam's sin rather than direct inheritance, salvation would come through imitation of the righteousness of Jesus. This would mean that a man who lived without sin would save himself.

If man retains anything of goodness in him, then God is lessened. "To the extent that good is ascribed to man, glory is taken away from the only adorable God." (Hanko, *Ibid*) The problem with this idea is that it does not necessarily follow. The opposing argument is that if there is any goodness in mankind, it proves the glory of God. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Matt 5:16) The counterargument is that it is the good works of the saved that cause men to glorify God. But is not glorifying God itself a good work? If man is totally depraved, then Jesus should have said to let your light shine before saved men, because unsaved men are incapable of seeing even a glimmer of light.

Some would argue from observation that people cannot be totally depraved because they do good things all the time. A person may yield the right of way to another driver; a person may give money or food to the homeless person on the street corner. Calvin and his followers contend that, apart from those who have been chosen for salvation, there is no altruism. Everything the unregenerate man does is based on self-interest.

Hence, how much soever men may disguise their impurity, some are restrained only by shame, others by a fear of the laws, from breaking out into many kinds of wickedness. Some aspire to an honest life, as deeming it most conducive to their interest, while

others are raised above the vulgar lot, that, by the dignity of their station, they may keep inferiors to their duty. (*Institutes*, Vol. I, Bk. II, Chap. 3, para. 3)

Thus God allows mankind to do what appears to be good, but man only does it for what he can get in return. The person who yielded the right of way did so to avoid a collision or in the hope that someone else will afford him the same courtesy. The person who gives to the beggar does so only out of fear that he may one day be in the same situation. There is no “art for art’s sake” or goodness for goodness sake.

The Biblical View

While arguments over free will may have precipitated the Augustinian/Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, the scriptures supporting free will are best left for other points of doctrine. There are other arguments against it that fit better here.

Total depravity as a doctrine did not exist before Augustine. None of the church fathers before him ever presented it as a doctrine. In fact, Pelagius had been cleared of heresy by a Council of Carthage just three years before the one that declared free will to be heresy. (Remember, it was Augustine that called that latter council expressly because the earlier one had not gone his way.) The doctrine is an extension of Gnosticism. The Gnostics taught that all physical existence was evil, in spite of God declaring it good in Genesis 1. They taught a dual nature summed up as “Matter bad; Spirit good.” While Calvin never went so far as to say that all material things were bad, he did say that after the Fall, all mankind was totally and irrevocably bad.

If Calvin taught total depravity as an opposition to minimizing the sinfulness of sin, he failed miserably. Rather than emphasizing sin, the doctrine leaves the idea that sin is the normal state of man. Sin is routine. If man is totally depraved he cannot even recognize sin, and God does man a disservice by making him aware of sin. If sin is so utterly bad (which it is), then a loving God would want everyone to come away from sin. But the doctrine also says that God elects only some to receive enlightenment. Everyone else is no better nor any worse off than when they started. How can I miss what I can’t conceive? And if I can’t conceive God without his direct intervention, what difference does it make if I sin? If my sin is mitigated by self-interest, at least it is mitigated.

But that is merely an argument from logic. If I am totally depraved, my logic is faulty. Instead we have to look at scripture. And there the Augustinian/Calvinists run into a problem.

Is Jesus Christ God, or man, or man and God? The doctrine of total depravity runs afoul of any of these three options. What if Jesus was entirely God? If so, then he would necessarily live a sinless life. But what would be the point? If God could save without Jesus dying on the tree, then his time on earth was a waste. If his sacrifice

was essential but he was in no way human, how does it differ from animal sacrifices? They were sinless, and inefficient. Paul says Jesus had to be human to save humans.

But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. (Gal 4:4-5)

The other two options require that Jesus was human. If Jesus was human and all humans are totally depraved, then he must have shared in that depravity. As the previous passage indicates, he was “made of a woman.” Paul further asserts that he was “made in the likeness of men.” (Php 2:17) The writer of Hebrews goes further.

Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. (Heb 2:17)

He had to be made human in order to make reconciliation for sin. That means he had to be in all ways

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human. The next verse says he was tempted. If he was not one of us, he could not be tempted; but if he could not be tempted he could not be our High Priest. He was “was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” (Heb 4:15) But if total depravity is a true doctrine, he was born with sin. So either the doctrine is wrong, or the writer of Hebrews is wrong.

Furthermore, the scriptures indicate sin is an action. In Genesis 39:9, Joseph asked how he could perform an act “and sin against God.” All of the sacrifices of Leviticus 4 are for sins which were “committed.” Jesus told people to “sin no more,” (Jn 5:14; 8:11) implying a choice and an action. The writer of Hebrews says, “For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins.” (Heb 10:26) Sin is a willful act. Calvin said that a child who dies without being baptized is condemned forever, even though the child could not willfully commit sin. How does that compare to the scriptures.

The doctrine of total depravity is the foundation of Calvinist theology. If it fails, and it fails miserably, then the other doctrines expressed in TULIP are based on a faulty premise. A conclusion based on a false premise is not necessarily true. It is not necessarily false, either, so in later months we will look at the remaining elements of Calvinist doctrine.

A CHRISTIAN NATION

There it was again. A meme on Facebook saying, “America is a Christian Nation. Share if you agree.” First off, I never share such things, as a matter of principal. But then, there was also that other thing. I couldn’t share, because I couldn’t agree. I don’t object, as some do, to using “Christian” as an adjective; but is/was/ever will be America a Christian nation?

The first argument that some would make is that America was founded by Christians on Christian principles. Historically, that is an argument based on scanty evidence. America was founded principally on British civil law, with some modifications. At the time, most British subjects were nominally Christian, but even that demographic was shrinking. Of the American “Founding Fathers,” a few were Catholics and several were deists. Deism, in its simplest definition, is a belief that God exists as creator but has little or no interest or control in the lives of the creation. It denies the existence of miracles, but may allow for “providence.” It denies the infallibility of scriptures and relies on human reason. Some historians claim that the religion clause of the First Amendment was put there not to save Christians from government control, but to prevent Christians from denying Deists a portion in the new nation. In other words, it was established to combat the sentiments expressed in the “America is a Christian nation” meme.

Well, maybe Mr. Madison and his companions were not exactly Christians. Hasn’t America been historically predominantly Christian? Ah, there is a little word there that makes a big difference. Predominantly. By including that word, one admits that there have always been atheists, deists, pantheists, and other “ists” among the population. For a person to claim to be Christian, they have to be fully Christian. Just as a person cannot be a

Christian and an atheist, neither can a nation. In fact, no nation can be characterized by any religion. America is no more a Christian nation than Iran is an exclusively Muslim nation or China is a purely Communist nation. There are Christians in all those nations, and non-Christians, and even anti-Christians. As Will Shakspeare would put it, “Aye, there’s the rub.” A nation cannot be characterized as belonging only to a portion of its membership. It would be difficult, even, to say that America is an American nation.

The worst part about the “America is a Christian nation” meme is that it is used in a non-Christian way. Usually it is an expression of hatred, or at least of exclusivity. Often the sentiment seems to be that because it is supposedly a Christian nation, all other religions should stay out. If early Jewish Christians had maintained that attitude, where would most of us be today? In fact, some expressed the same thought. In Acts 15 some Jewish Christians were saying “Christianity is a Jewish religion. Share if you agree.” This led to a meeting of their elders and the apostles, in which it was decided not to take that view.

For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. (Acts 15:28-29)

These “necessary things” preceded the Jewish religion. In essence, they were saying that Christianity was open to all believers. If there were such thing as a Christian nation, and if America were one, then America could take no less of an attitude than that of the apostles: welcoming to all who would come.

Timothy J. O’Hearn
737 Monell Dr NE
Albuquerque NM 87123