

## Christian Studies

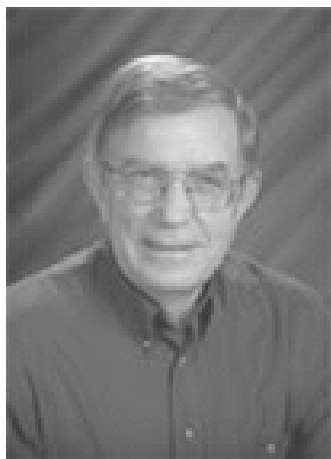
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## In Memoriam



Dr. Mike White  
1938–2007

Dr. Mike White, son of John and Frances White, was born November 26, 1938, in Danville, Illinois. He died August 31, 2007, while visiting his son Paul in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Mike received his undergraduate degree from Harding College where he met Gwen Combest, whom he married in 1960. After graduating from Harding, Mike entered the University of Illinois where he received his Ph.D. in Chemistry. Mike came to the University of Texas in 1966, where he held the Robert A. Welch Chair in the Department of Chemistry.

Mike published over 650 scholarly articles and graduated more than 50 doctoral students, many of whom are now teaching in universities around the world. In 2004 Mike

began a joint research appointment with Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Washington State, where at the time of his death he was director of the Department of Energy's Institute for Interfacial Catalysis.

Mike was a longtime member and elder of the Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ in Austin and served on the Board of Austin Graduate School of Theology. Mike is survived by his wife Gwen; son Mark and daughter-in-law Melissa; daughter RaeAnne and son-in-law Todd Landrum and their children; and his son Paul. He is also survived by his mother, Frances, and four siblings.

A friend and administrative associate described Mike as "a mentor, a teacher, a friend, a model for righteous living, and a loving husband, father, and granddad. He treated those he met with respect and generosity, and his passing leaves a mighty gap in not just the academic and scientific community but also in the circles of faith in which he served and lived."

Mike's common exhortation to friends was "Press on." And we will press on; and because of having walked a part of the journey with Mike, we will do so with more resolve, and courage, and expectancy than had we not known him.

# Christian Studies

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Volume 22

2007-2008

*FOREWORD* 4

*ARTICLES*

Divine Sovereignty and  
Human Freedom in the Old Testament 5  
R. Mark Shipp

The Trouble with Tulips:  
Romans and Reformed Theology 19  
Ben Witherington III

Pagan & Christian Reflections on Human Free Will 29

Universal Salvation and the Christian Story 37  
Allan J. McNicol

*Beyond the Darkness*  
Martha Pounders Walker 57

From Mystery to Mastery:  
Christo-Paganism Then and Now 59  
Michael Weed

Baptism: Mode and Meaning 69

*OBITER DICTA* 73

*BOOKSHELF*

*The Lepers Among Us*, by Jim Reynolds  
A Review Essay  
Reviewed by M. Todd Hall 79

*CONTRIBUTORS* 83

## The Trouble with Tulips: Romans and Reformed Theology<sup>\*</sup>

Ben Witherington III

Scholars who look to Calvin and Luther and their legacy pride themselves on being biblical and giving meticulous attention to the biblical text. This is not a surprise since both Calvin and Luther were formidable exegetes and theologians, and they set examples that many have sought to follow ever since. Reformed exegetes have a hard time coming to grips with the paradox of a God who is both sovereign and free, and yet somehow so exercises that sovereignty and limits his own freedom that he has made it possible for human beings to have and exercise a measure of freedom as well, including in matters of salvation. They have a hard time understanding that holy love does not involve determinism, however subtle. Indeed love, if it is real love, must be freely given and freely received, for God has chosen to relate to us as persons, not as automata. They have a hard time dealing with the idea that God programmed into the system a certain amount of indeterminacy, risk, and freedom. And maybe, just maybe the good old Evangelical lust for certainty

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<sup>\*</sup> Printed by permission from the much fuller discussion in Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism, and Wesleyanism* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005). Excerpted for *Christian Studies* by Jeffrey Peterson, Professor, AGST.

leads us all too quickly to fill in gaps and silences of Scripture, driving us to bad exegesis.

There are in fact profound exegetical problems with the T.U.L.I.P. theology of Calvinism and to a lesser extent of Lutheranism.<sup>1</sup> These the o-logical ideas are linked, and, with the exception of the “T” and the “L,” are necessary corollaries of each other. For example, if one believes that God has predetermined people to be saved from before the foundation of the world, then of course election is unconditional, grace is irresistible, and perseverance is inevitable. These three linked ideas do not necessarily require the notion of total depravity or limited atonement (e.g., God could have predetermined to save everyone, and original sin might not have had as extensive an effect as sometimes thought).

There is then a logical consistency to this cluster of linked ideas, and it is the logic and coherency that seem to make it compelling, rather than its real exegetical viability. And of course the danger of any such necessary linking of ideas is that if one link in the chain is dropped then the chain ceases to hold. For example, if it can be demonstrated that apostasy from the true faith is not merely possible but is an idea that Christians are regularly warned against in the New Testament, then there is something wrong not only with the notion of perseverance but also with the ideas of irresistible grace and predetermination. This essay will deal with some of the key texts of the Reformation, showing the problems with the traditional Reformed exegesis.

Romans more than any other source has determined Evangelical exegesis when it comes to the nature of salvation, and within the text of Romans, there is no text more commented on than Romans 7. Oddly enough, one of

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<sup>1</sup> T.U.L.I.P. is an acronym summarizing the main points of classical Reformed theology: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and the Perseverance of the saints.

the most fundamental problems in Evangelical exegesis of Romans is the failure to read Romans cumulatively, rather than sound-biting it. This failure manifests itself when Romans 7 is read as if it has little or no connection with Romans 5. But the story told in Romans 5:12–20 is the very story that underlies and undergirds Romans 7, as we shall see. In order to set up the discussion, it is necessary to speak briefly about Augustine’s views on Romans 5–7 and their influence on Luther and others. Augustine’s interpretation of Romans, and especially Romans 7, seems to be in various regards an overreaction to Pelagius, who argued that sin comes from human beings’ free imitation of Adam and can be overcome by imitating Christ. Pelagius also suggested that justification, at least final justification, is through determined moral action.

T. J. Deidun aptly summarizes the key points of Augustine’s mature interpretation of Romans:

- 1) The “works of the Law” which Paul says can never justify, mean moral actions in general without the grace of Christ, not Jewish practices as Pelagius and others maintained.
- 2) The “righteousness of God” is not an attribute of God but the gift he confers in making people righteous.
- 3) Romans 5:12 now became the key text for Augustine’s doctrine of original sin: all individuals (infants included) were co-involved in Adam’s sin. As is well known, Augustine’s exegesis of this verse largely depended on the Latin translation *in quo* (“in whom”) of the Greek *eph hoi* (“in that,” “because”) and on the omission in his manuscripts of the second mention of “death,” with the result that “sin” became the subject of “spread”: sin spread to all (by “generation,” not by “imitation”).
- 4) Romans 7:14–25, which before the controversy Augustine had understood to be referring to humanity without Christ, he now applied to the Christian to deprive Pelagius of the opportunity of applying the positive elements in the passage (esp. v. 22) to unredeemed humanity. To do this, Augustine was obliged to water down Paul’s negative statements: the apostle is describing not the bondage of sin but the bother of concupiscence; and he laments not that he cannot do good (*facere*) but that he cannot do it perfectly (*perficere*).

5) During this period Augustine came to express more boldly his teaching on predestination. It does not depend on God's advance knowledge of people's merit as Pelagius and others maintained in their interpretation of Romans 9:10ff. nor even on his advance knowledge of "the merit of faith" as Augustine had supposed in 394 in his remarks on the same passage: it depends rather on God's "most hidden judgment" whereby he graciously chooses whom he will deliver from the mass of fallen humanity. Everything is pure gift (1 Cor 4:7).<sup>2</sup>

Of course all of these points of Augustine are today under dispute among interpreters of Romans, and some are clearly wrong, such as the conclusions based on the Latin text of Romans 5:12. For our purposes it is interesting to note that Augustine, having changed his mind about Romans 7:14–25 in overreacting to Pelagius, must water down the stress on the bondage of the will expressed in this text in order to apply it to Christians. Luther takes a harder and more consistent line, even though in the end he refers the text to the wrong subject—namely everyone including Christians. It is also noteworthy that Pelagius does not dispute God's destining of persons, only that God does it on the basis of his foreknowledge of the response of believers.

The discussion of merit which Pelagius introduced into the conversation about Romans resurfaces in the medieval exegetes after Augustine. Paul's doctrine of "justification" is filtered through Aristotelian thinking, so that grace becomes a *donum super additum*, something added on top of God's gift of human faculties (see Aquinas). "Divine *charis* became 'infused grace.'" The nominalist school of William of Occam focused on merit, even in a Pelagian way, and it was to this repristinization of Pelagius' case that Luther, an Augustinian monk much like his founder, was to react in his various lectures and then in his commentary on Romans. But it was not just Pelagius he was reacting to. In due course Luther came to see self-

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<sup>2</sup> T. J. Verdun, "Romans," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden; Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), 601.

righteousness as the most fundamental of human sins (not concupiscence), and his polemics were directed against both Judaism and Catholicism, which he saw as religions embodying this besetting sin, as well as being preoccupied with “merit.” Luther thought that Romans 7:14–25 was about that sin of self-righteousness.

We are perhaps by this time all too familiar with Luther’s own wrestling with his Augustinian heritage, especially when it came to the problem of sin, and particularly sin in the life of the believer. But before we too quickly join that wrestling match, leaping into the fray and shouting *simul justus et peccator* as a description of the normal Christian life, it will be well to ask if in fact Romans 7 describes the Christian life at all. My answer will be—on further review no, it does not. Christians are not in bondage to sin as non-Christians may be said to be. But to understand Romans 7, we must hear Paul’s explicit telling of Adam’s tale in Romans 5 first.

The logic of argumentation found in Romans 5:12–21 will seem strange to many moderns, for it deals with the concept of how one can affect many, for ill or good, and not only affect them but determine their destiny to a real extent. Paul can say in the midst of such an argument that death spread to all humans because they all sinned, but then turn around and say that death reigned over even those who did not trespass in the same fashion Adam did. Some have drawn an analogy with the notion of federal headship over a group of people (e.g., when the president declares war on another nation, whether the citizens of the United States will it or not, they are affected by this decision and are in effect also at war with the nation in question). This analogy does get at some of the dimensions of Paul’s argument. But there is a dimension of corporate personality—or better, incorporative personality—to Paul’s argument as well.



Romans 5:12–21 does not stand in isolation but indicates some further conclusions to be drawn from the previous argument in Romans 5:1–11. The *dia touto* of v. 12 must surely refer back to the material in the first eleven verses of this chapter, and should be translated “because of this.” In other words, vv. 12ff. take the argument to a further stage, based on what had been said in 5:1–11. This whole section is comparing Adam and his progeny with Christ and those in him. It is not about comparing Adam with all other humans. Notice that the phrase “through him” is in the emphatic position in the first part of the leading sentence, which suggests that Paul is going to tell us in the last part of the sentence what is true through another one.

Paul is not suggesting that Adam and Christ are alike in all respects, not even in the way they affect the race that flows forth from them. The point of comparison is simply this: that the act of the one man had far-reaching consequences for all those who came after him and had integral connection with him. In all other respects, and at some length in vv. 13–17 Paul wishes to distinguish Adam and Christ. Thus, it is not necessary to argue that Christ’s salvation must pass to or affect everyone in the exact same manner as Adam’s sin, for as Paul says, the gift of salvation is in many ways not like the trespass. Paul’s “universalism is of the sort that holds to Christ as the way for all.”<sup>3</sup>

In v. 14 we hear that Adam is the type of the Coming One. The word *homoiomati* refers to likeness (the mark made by striking or an impression made by something, or the form or pattern of something made by a mold), but the term *typos* is even more important. A *typos* refers to something or someone that prefigures something or someone else, in this case someone or something that belongs to the eschatological age. C. E. B. Cranfield says,

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<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (ed. L. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 529.

“Adam in his universal effectiveness for ruin is the type which . . . prefigures Christ in his universal effectiveness for salvation.”<sup>4</sup> Notice that it is Adam’s transgression which makes him that type of Christ. In short it is his one deed which affects all, just as the Christ event affects all. “Paul sees history gathering at nodal points and crystallizing upon outstanding figures . . . who are notable in themselves as individual persons, but even more notable as representative figures. These . . . incorporate the human race, or sections of it, within themselves, and the dealings they have with God they have representatively on behalf of their [people].”<sup>5</sup>

Having initiated the analogy, Paul in v. 15 proceeds to clarify by saying that the trespass is in fact not exactly like the gift of grace. Again we have a “how much more” argument. If the trespass affected many and many died, how much more will the grace of God and the gift that comes through the one man Christ abound to many all that much more. While it is true that *polloi* can be used to mean “all,” it may be significant that Paul at this juncture switches to using *polloi* (usually translated “many”) whereas before he had used *pantes* (“all”) Paul does not wish to convey the notion of automatic universal salvation. While Paul and his coworkers do not have a problem with the idea that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, not just for the elect (see, e.g., 1 Tim 2:5–6: “for there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all persons”), Paul does not believe that this automatically means all will be saved. There is the little matter of responding in faith to God’s work of salvation in Christ and receiving the gift of God’s grace. Still it is a crucial

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<sup>4</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 283.

<sup>5</sup> C. K. Barrett, *From First Adam to Last: A Study in Pauline Theology* (New York: Scribner, 1962), 5.

Pauline theme as early as Galatians and as late as the Pastorals that God's desire is for all to be saved, and that Christ's atonement is to cover the sins of the world, not just of the elect.

First Timothy 2:3–4 provides the sort of context in which we should view this matter, namely that God desires that “all people be saved and come to the full knowledge of the truth,” a theme we also find in 1 Timothy 4:10 where we hear of “the living God who is the Savior of all people, especially of the faithful.” Notice that the limitation comes at the point of those who respond in faith, not at the point of God's desire or will. It is in this context that we must evaluate what is said in Titus 3:5–6 about how this salvation happens “according to his mercy, he saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, which is poured out on us in abundance through Jesus Christ, our Savior.” The language of election is used in a corporate sense in these letters, and when salvation is spoken of, God's desire for universal salvation is expressed while at the same time making clear that only those are saved who respond in faith to the message of salvation, are reborn, and receive the Holy Spirit.

What is intimated in Romans is made quite explicit in the Pastorals. The tulip begins to wilt when one reads Romans in light of the Pastorals rather than through the much later lens of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. Paul will address in Romans 6–7 a series of questions that arise out of his telling of the Adam story as it was compared to the Christ story in Romans 5. The story of Adam and those in Adam, and the story of Christ and those in Christ continue to undergird and underlie the discussion throughout the material leading up to Romans 8. J. D. G. Dunn puts it this way: “Paul's thought is still determined by the Adam/Christ contrast of 5:12–21. The death here spoken of is the death of Adam, and those in Adam and of the Adamic epoch.”

In one large argument in four parts encompassing all of Romans 6–7, Paul will discourse on human fallenness in the light of the Christ event. His thought does indeed move from solution to plight. Thus, some of what Paul will say about life outside of Christ he will say looking at things through the eyes of Christ rather than through the lens of the Law. To some extent Paul must forestall some possible false conclusions that one might draw from the previous argument in Romans 5:12–21. Here, however, we must reiterate two crucial points: (1) It appears clear from a close reading of Romans 5 that neither Augustine, nor Luther, nor Calvin understood the trajectory of Paul's argument properly. We can see where that argument is leading in texts like 1 Timothy 2:3–6. Paul is his own best interpreter. (2) The incorporative nature of life in Adam or life in Christ does not in either case alleviate individuals of their own responsibilities for their own sin, nor for the need for their own response to the offer of salvation. As for God's desire, God desires that none should perish or fall short of eternal life.

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