

Rightly Understanding the Nature of Man and Effectual Calling

A Response to Leighton Flowers, Pt. 1

By Drew S. C. Mery

Lately I have been spending quite a bit of time listening to Leighton Flowers' podcast and reading through his blog. He is one of the very few non-Calvinists in the Southern Baptist Convention that is actually willing to stick his head out there and dialogue with Calvinists. For that I give him credit. I very much appreciate his willingness to speak with me and Dale Stenberg (my fellow partner in crime on the Reformasium Podcast¹). I do, however, have great concerns regarding his position on certain theological topics, and I greatly question his abilities in rightly addressing our biblical argumentation.

This article is specifically in response to one of his podcast episodes titled, "Total Inability and the Effectual Calling" (Nov. 10, 2015).² This post will only deal with his statements on total inability. I plan on providing a second post shortly to address his arguments against effectual calling and his presentation of his view regarding the power of the gospel.

I will provide key quotations of Flowers from this podcast episode and then respond in kind. These may not be 100% verbatim quotations, but I've tried my best to write his words exactly. In some instances I've condensed lengthy quotations for the sake of simplicity (getting to the point). At the very least, they should be accurate representations of his views. Leighton Flowers is more than welcome to correct me if I have misquoted or misrepresented him in any way. That is certainly not my intention, and I will make attempts to fix such errors. I would of course also encourage anyone reading this to first listen to the podcast episode.

Leighton Flowers: "If someone has the ability to have the mental ascent of the facts being given through the Scripture, and they have the ability to be convicted by that, then they should have the ability to respond to that in faith."

"Man can understand and place their trust in Buddha, or in Joseph Smith, or in Satan, or whoever, even giving their lives for these people and their systems, but for some reason, according to Calvinists, God decreed for mankind to be incapable of placing their trust in the truth claims of the gospel. They cannot, by nature, put their trust in it."

¹ Reformasium Podcast "Lively Discussion from a Reformed Perspective" www.reformasium.com

² "Total Inability and the Effectual Calling" Podcast episode by Leighton Flowers.

<http://www.stitcher.com/podcast/soteriology-101/e/total-inability-and-the-effectual-calling-41204682>. Accessed on December 16, 2015.

“It’s God’s doing, according to the Calvinist, that man is in the sinful state they’re in and can’t savingly believe in the gospel unless enabled to do so by his effectual calling.”

Response: Leighton Flowers seems to have a fundamental misunderstanding regarding the biblical teaching on the nature of man, as well as what Calvinists actually believe and mean with respect to the inability of fallen mankind. Based on his statements, he seems to think that we are speaking of a *physical inability*. I see no other way of understanding the connection he makes between understanding facts and being able to put one’s faith in those facts. The same goes with his connection regarding being able to devote oneself to these false religions and their leaders, but somehow not being able to devote oneself to Jesus Christ. In other words, if one is physically able to mentally ascent to the facts of the gospel (i.e. at least have an intellectual understanding of gospel truth), then we ought to conclude that they are physically able to respond to that truth in faith. Again, if one is physically able to be devoted to Joseph Smith, for example, then how else can we conclude than that they are physically able to devote themselves to Jesus Christ, if they so choose.

This, however, is erroneous to the core. First, the inability that Calvinists speak of regarding man’s response to the gospel is not of a physical nature, but a spiritual or moral nature. This has to do with their sinful nature. Thomas Schreiner brings this out wonderfully in his commentary on Romans, Chapter 8 verse 8:

But Paul’s argument goes further. Not only do they refuse to submit to God’s law; they ‘cannot’ keep it. And ‘those who are of the flesh are not able to please God’. Paul is certainly speaking not of a physical inability to keep God’s law but of a moral inability to do so. He does not conclude that those of the flesh are not responsible for their sins because of their inability. Rather, he holds them responsible for their sins even though they cannot keep God’s law. Paul apparently did not believe that people were only culpable for sin if they had the ‘moral’ ability to keep commandments.³

Leighton may want to object that Paul is speaking of man’s inability in relation to the law, not the gospel. However, the point still stands, because it speaks to man’s nature in and of itself. Not to mention that this is not the only text that we derive the teaching of total inability from (e.g. Jn. 6:44). We could also point out that the text says that “those who are in the flesh cannot please God”. Yet, believing in the gospel is certainly something that is pleasing to God. Again, Paul is here contrasting those who are in Christ, those who set their mind on the Spirit, with those who set their mind on the flesh – they are hostile to God. This is fundamentally why they are unable to respond to the truth of God; *as hostile enemies of God, they have no desire to do so*. Paul Washer comments on this point as well:

Finally, total depravity does not mean that men do not possess the necessary faculties to obey God. Man is not a victim who desires to obey but is unable to because of factors beyond his control. God has endowed man with an intellect, a will, and a freedom to choose. Man is

³ Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans* (MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 412-413.

therefore responsible before God as a moral agent. Total depravity does mean that man *cannot* submit himself to God because he *will not*, and he will not because of his own hostility toward God.⁴

Yet, this is precisely what Flowers overlooks. The inability in man is not a physical inability (which would include a mental inability), but is a moral inability. In other words, they act according to their sinful nature, and unless the grace of God opens their eyes to see and their ears to hear, then they will continue in their willful rebellion against their Creator (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16). So yes, men and women entrust their souls to false religious systems; but that just proves the point. They do so because they're enemies of God and choose to serve the lie rather than the Creator (Rom. 1).

Another way of stating this biblical truth that God deals with men according to their moral (and covenantal) standing before God is to say that "God deals with man according to his *obligation*, not according to the measure of his ability."⁵ Dr. Robert L. Reymond goes on to say,

Before the Fall, man had both the obligation and the ability to obey God. As a result of the Fall, he retained the former but lost the latter. Man's inability to obey, arising from the moral corruption of his nature, does not remove from him his obligation to love God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, and his neighbor as himself. His obligation to obey God remains intact. If God dealt with man today according to his ability to obey, he would have to reduce his moral demands to the vanishing point. Conversely, if we determined the measure of man's ability from the sweeping obligations implicit in the divine commands, then we would need to predicate *total ability* for man, that is to say, we would all have to adopt the Pelagian position, for the commands of God cover the *entire* horizon of moral obligation.⁶

Second, Flowers mixes categories, and in so doing, puts the emphasis and focal point of the discussion where it shouldn't be. This only muddies the water. For instance, he says, according to the Calvinist "God decreed for mankind to be incapable of placing their trust in the truth claims of the gospel." I find it interesting that he has to bring in God's decree when Calvinists themselves don't address the issue of man's inability from that angle, but from the angle that is presented to us in Scripture – the moral responsibility of mankind. Flowers seems to want to go where the Scriptures don't lead us. It seems like a desperate attempt at producing an emotional response, rather than producing an exegetical response.

Another problem I have with this response by Flowers against the inability of man, is that it assumes a fatalistic determinism. Yet, Calvinists do not put forth a fatalistic determinism with regard to God's decree and man's responsibility. Rather, what we hold to is known as compatibilism – the belief that God's exhaustive sovereignty and man's responsibility/choices are compatible with one another; man's responsibility is of a moral nature before their Creator.

⁴ Washer, Paul. *The Gospel's Power & Message* (MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 117. Emphasis is his.

⁵ Reymond, Robert L. *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 454. Emphasis his.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 454-455. Emphasis his.

Several passages serve to demonstrate this compatibility between God's sovereignty and man's will (e.g. Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:23-28; Phil. 2:12-13). In other words, Calvinists readily assert the moral responsibility of mankind, and we do so while at the same time affirming the exhaustive sovereignty of God over all things, even in the matter of our salvation. Why do we do it? Because that's what the Scriptures clearly teach. So Flowers' presentation is overly simplistic at best and woefully misleading at worst.

With regard to this compatibility, Louis Berkhof remarks:

There is not a single indication in Scripture that the inspired writers are conscious of a contradiction in connection with these matters. They never make an attempt to harmonize the two. This may well restrain us from assuming a contradiction here, even if we cannot reconcile both truths.⁷

I might add that the only place where such an attempt is made is in the person of Paul's interlocutor in Romans 9, "You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?'" I don't think Flowers recognizes it, but this is in essence the objection he raises as well. So I will supply the same response that the apostle Paul did:

But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

In conclusion, I would very much like to ask professor Flowers his understanding of God's sovereign outworking of the gospel itself. Does he believe that God sovereignly decreed that Christ be crucified for the forgiveness of sinners? If so, then how does he, according to his theological system, work in the many sins of man that were necessary in bringing about that redemptive plan? If he asserts that God merely foresaw the sinful acts of man, then he places the cart before the horse, essentially asserting that man committed these sinful acts before God even decreed Christ's crucifixion, and ultimately it would put the redemptive plan itself in the hands of man, not God. So, what of passages like Acts 4:23-28? I would very much like to see professor Flowers address such passages, and if he has already, then I'm sure I will come across them in due time, and most certainly provide some response to them.

⁷ Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology* (MI: Eerdmans, 1941), 106.