

Calvin 500: The Five Points of Calvinism

As we are nearing the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, we are celebrating this by spending five weeks looking at Calvin and his importance. Last week, we looked at the life of John Calvin. This week we will look at "the five points of Calvinism."

John Calvin was such an influential pastor and theologian that his views became a major system of theology known as "Calvinism." Originally, the label Calvinism was applied to the entire body of Calvin's theology, but today, Calvinism is used almost exclusively to refer his views on salvation or soteriology (*soter* = salvation). Thus, one can disagree with Calvin on any number of issues, but so long as he agrees with Calvin on soteriology, he is called a Calvinist.

The Sovereignty of God

What was Calvin's view on salvation? What is Calvinism? John Calvin is best known for his emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation. The "sovereignty of God" means that God is the King and in control, having the right, the power, and the wisdom to do whatever he pleases. Of course, everyone believes in the general sovereignty of God.

Psalm 115:3

Yet, it is Calvin who is most known for trumpeting the sovereignty of God in salvation. Particularly, Calvin recovered an understanding that God saves whom he wants to save.

The History of the Five Points

This view of the sovereignty of God in salvation is often stated in five main points, which are known as "The Five Points of Calvinism." Now, Calvin did not actually write about these five points as being the sum of his thought on soteriology. You will never find a pamphlet entitled, "My Five Points by John Calvin." The five points came to fruition after Calvin's death.

John Calvin's successor at Geneva was Theodore Beza. Beza was a gifted teacher and theologian who heartily carried on Calvin's work at Geneva. Beza had a student named Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). After completing his time of training in Geneva, Arminius took a position in Holland in 1603. At this time he was a strict Calvinist. However, while in Holland, Arminius faced stiff opposition to Calvin's teachings. While he was defending attacks on Calvin's teachings, Arminius was persuaded to criticize certain aspects of John Calvin's teaching. Arminius still considered himself a Calvinist, for indeed, he still held to many of Calvin's views. However, Arminius disagreed with Calvin's soteriology.

Arminius wanted to revise some of the creeds of the church to fit his new theological views, but he died in 1609 before he was able to accomplish this. In the following year, Arminius's followers, known as Arminians, drew up their own creed. This creed was based upon five key points of disagreement that Arminius had with Calvinism. The Arminians embraced much of Calvinism, but they objected to these five points. Their creed is known as the Remonstrance (disagreement or protest).

Calvin's followers, the Calvinists, objected to the teaching of the Remonstrance. They responded with the Counter-Remonstrance. Eventually, the Calvinists held a council to refute the Remonstrance. The Calvinists met in Dort from 1618-1619. This meeting is commonly called the Synod of Dort. During this meeting, the Calvinists produced a response to the Remonstrance. Since the Remonstrance was centered on five key points of disagreement with Calvinism, the Calvinists produced a five-fold response. This response is known as the Canons of Dort. The five points that the Canons of Dort articulate have come to be called "the five points of Calvinism." So, "the five points of Calvinism" are not a summary of Calvin's teaching. They are not something that Calvin devised. The five points arose as a response to the Arminians' objections to Calvinism.

The five points are commonly known by these descriptions:

1. **T**otal Depravity
2. **U**nconditional Election
3. **L**imited Atonement
4. **I**rresistible Grace
5. **P**erseverance of the Saints

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This produces the acronym TULIP. Bear in mind that while the content of these five points can be traced back to the Canons of Dort, these particular labels and the acronym TULIP first appeared in 1932, in Loraine Boettner's work, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*.

1) Total Depravity

Total depravity means that every part of man is corrupt, bad, and wicked. Man's whole being has been affected by sin. Sin affects man's body, soul, intellect, will, emotions, conscience, etc. Every part of man has been affected by sin.

Man is Dead

Sin makes a person spiritually dead.

Ephesians 2:1

Colossians 2:13

Unbelievers are dead spiritually. They are alive physically, but dead spiritually. That is, they cannot respond spiritually. Unbelievers not only do not believe in God, but they cannot believe in God. Unbelieving man has no capacity to believe in God.

Man Must Be Made Alive

Before an unbeliever can believe in God, he must first be made alive spiritually.

Ephesians 2:1

Colossians 2:13

Man is dead, but God makes him alive. This is known in theology as regeneration or being born again. Calvin held that regeneration was a sovereign act of God not based upon anything that a person is or does. In fact, the distinction between Calvinism and Arminianism can be boiled down to the relationship between regeneration and faith. Arminians hold that faith precedes regeneration. That is, everyone is equally capable of believing in God. Once a person believes, then God causes him to be born again. Calvinists hold that regeneration precedes faith. That is, unbelievers cannot believe unless God first regenerates them. Once God causes someone to be born again, then he is capable of believing.

Illustration

The Arminian says that man is in trouble. He is like a man who has taken a sea cruise and has fallen off of the boat. He is drowning at sea and about to go under. Someone throws him a life preserver, and with his last effort, he grabs the life preserver and is hauled back onto the boat. Grabbing the life preserver is equivalent to the act of faith.

The Calvinist says that man is in trouble. He is like a man who has taken a sea cruise and has fallen off of the boat. Man has drowned and is a corpse floating face down in the water. He is dead and incapable of saving himself. God must bring the dead man back to life. Regeneration precedes faith.

John Calvin is called the theologian of the Holy Spirit because of his emphasis on the sovereign work of the Spirit in regeneration. Total depravity is the lynchpin for the five points. All the other five points depend upon understanding that man is dead spiritually.

2) Unconditional Election

Election refers to the fact that God chooses whom to save.

1 Thessalonians 1:4

Another related word is predestination.

Ephesians 1:5

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Predestination refers to deciding a person's destiny ahead of time (pre + desination). Every Christian believes in election and predestination. These terms should not be controversial. Calvin taught that election and predestination are unconditional. That is, God chooses whom to save. This choosing is not based upon anything that man does, but on God's choice.

Romans 9:10-12

God chose Jacob and not Esau. This choice, or election, was made before either had even been born. Thus, it was an unconditional election.

Romans 9:14-16

Arminians argue that God looks down the corridor of time, sees who will believe, and then chooses them. This is conditional election. It is conditioned upon the faith of man. Calvin held that God elects based upon his own pleasure, not based upon anything in man.

3) Limited Atonement

This is the most controversial of the five points. Calvin argued that Christ died only for the elect, only for those whom he had chosen.

Ephesians 5:25

Thus, Christ did not die for every single person who ever lived. He only died for those who were elect and would become believers. Thus, the atonement is limited in scope. Arminians argue for an unlimited atonement. That is, Christ died for everyone who ever lived. He made salvation possible for everyone.

John 3:16

John 1:29

However, all Calvinists believe that Christ's death is of infinite value. Hypothetically, if God decided today that he wanted to elect one additional person, nothing about the atonement would change. Jesus would not have to die on the cross again. Jesus' suffering on the cross was of infinite value, so that Jesus could have saved every man, woman, and child who was ever conceived. In this sense, the atonement is unlimited and infinite.

Illustration

Calvinists: Atonement is like a narrow bridge that goes all the way across the stream

Arminian: Atonement is like a wide bridge that goes half-way across the stream.

Two Practical Considerations

1) A Calvinist says is, "Everyone whose sins are paid for is in heaven. No one in hell had their sins paid for; otherwise, they would be in heaven." The Arminian says is, "Everyone in hell had their sins paid for." The practical question put to the Arminian becomes: Why is that person in hell? Hell is to punish for sins, but if everyone's sins have been paid for, then why does God send unbelievers to hell? This is a real dilemma for the Arminian: people are in hell paying for their sins, which Jesus has already paid for. This is double jeopardy.

2) When Jesus was on the cross, was he paying for the sins of all the unbelievers who had already died? Was he paying for the sins of Cain? Was he paying for the sins of those who died in the flood? Was he paying for the sins of Ishmael and Esau? Was he paying for the sins of Absalom and Jezebel? What about Herod? Herod was the one who commanded all babies in Bethlehem be slain. This Herod died before Jesus did. Did Jesus pay for his sins? It seems rather ridiculous to imagine that Jesus was dying for the sins of those whose eternal fates were already sealed. By extension, it seems rather ridiculous to imagine that Jesus was dying for the sins of those whom he knew would never believe.

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4) Irresistible Grace

Calvin held that God draws the elect so that they cannot resist his grace. However, this is not like a tractor beam. God's wooing is so powerful and attractive that the elect has no desire to reject God. He wants to be saved.

John 6:37

This helps to explain how God's election and the will of man interact. God chooses to save a person, and he then begins to draw him to himself. God regenerates the man, and the man believes. Once a person is regenerated, he will always believe in Christ. Arminians argue that God draws all of mankind. Man is capable of either believing or resisting God. Calvin argued that God does draw all mankind but not equally. The non-elect are drawn but not all the way to salvation whereas the elect are drawn all the way to faith and salvation.

5) Perseverance of the Saints

Perseverance of the saints means that those who are believers will continue to believe and act like believers throughout their lives.

Matthew 24:13

We are not saved because we endure, but we endure because we are saved. Endurance is a fruit of salvation. It is not the cause of salvation. Perseverance is different from preservation. Preservation is the doctrine that God preserves those who are his. Another name for this is eternal security. Once God saves someone, that person is saved forever.

Related Historical Views

The debate over depravity, predestination, election, etc., did not begin in the 16th century with Calvinists and Arminians. Rather, this is an on-going debate that has surfaced at various times in church history.

Augustine and Pelagius

The original debate began in the 4th century between Augustine and Pelagius. Augustine held to what we today call "Calvinism." Actually, Calvin was most influenced by Augustine. He learned predestination from Augustine.

Pelagius objected to Augustine's teachings. Augustine taught that man was depraved. Pelagius taught that man was good. Adam fell, but this did not really affect his seed, except to set a bad example. Augustine spent much energy refuting Pelagius. Eventually, Pelagius lost because Pelagianism is not compatible with the teachings of the Bible.

However, some who were sentimental to Pelagius's teachings modified his position. They said that man was fallen, but not so far that he couldn't pick himself back up. This became known as Semi-Pelagianism. This is basically equivalent to Arminianism.

Hyper-Calvinism

There is also an extreme form of election that often gets mistaken for Calvinism. When someone first recognizes the sovereignty of God in salvation, they often become a hyper-Calvinist. That is, they view mankind as simply robots or automatons who are following God's programming. Yet, Scripture does not present this view.

John 3:16

We are to preach the gospel to everyone, and those who are elect will respond. What is the call of the gospel? We tell people to repent and believe. Those who are elect will be able to repent and believe because they will have already been regenerated.

True Calvinism maintains the healthy balance that the Scriptures teach, without minimizing either the sovereignty of God or forgetting the freedom of man.