

Grace Christian Fellowship

Position Paper on

What GCF Believes About The Five Points of Calvinism

The Origin of The "Five Points"

To understand how and why the system of theology known to history as Calvinism came to bear this name and to be formulated into five points, one must understand the theological conflict which occurred in Holland during the first quarter of the seventeenth century.

The Protest of The Arminian Party

In 1610, just one year after the death of James Arminius (a Dutch seminary professor) five articles of faith based on his teachings were drawn up by his followers. The Arminians, as his followers came to be called, presented these five doctrines to the State of Holland in the form of a "Remonstrance" (i.e., a protest). The Arminian party insisted that the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism (the official expression of the doctrinal position of the Churches of Holland) be changed to conform to the doctrinal views contained in the Remonstrance. The Arminians objected to those doctrines upheld in both the Catechism and the Confession relating to divine sovereignty, human inability, unconditional election or predestination, particular redemption, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. It was in connection with these matters that they wanted the official standards of the Church of Holland revised.

The "Five Points" of Arminianism

Roger Nicole summarizes the five articles contained in the Remonstrance as follows:

1. God elects or reprobates on the basis of foreseen faith or unbelief.
2. Christ died for all men and for every man, although only believers are saved.
3. Man is so depraved that divine grace is necessary unto faith or any good deed.
4. This grace may be resisted.
5. Whether all who are truly regenerate will certainly persevere in the faith is a point which needs further investigation.

The last article was later altered so as to definitely teach the possibility of the truly regenerate believer's losing his faith and thus losing his salvation. However, Arminians have not been in agreement on this point - some have held that all who are regenerated by the Spirit of God are eternally secure and can never perish.

The Philosophical Basis of Arminianism

J. I. Packer, in analyzing the system of thought embodied in the Remonstrance, observes:

"The theology which it contained (known to history as Arminianism) stemmed from two philosophical principles: first, that divine sovereignty is not compatible with human freedom, nor therefore with human responsibility; second, that ability limits obligation From these principles, the Arminians drew two deductions: first, that since the Bible regards faith as a free and responsible act, it cannot be caused by God, but is exercised independently of Him; second, that since the Bible regards faith as obligatory on the part of all who hear the gospel, ability to believe must be universal. Hence, they maintained, Scripture must be interpreted as teaching the following positions:

1. Man is never so completely corrupted by sin that he cannot savingly believe the gospel when it is put before him, nor is he ever so completely controlled by God that he cannot reject it.
2. God's election of those who shall be saved is prompted by His foreseeing that they will of their own accord believe.
3. Christ's death did not ensure the salvation of anyone, for it did not secure the gift of faith to anyone (there is no such gift); what it did was rather to create a possibility of salvation for everyone if they believe.
4. It rests with believers to keep themselves in a state of grace by keeping up their faith; those who fail here fall away and are lost. Thus, Arminianism made man's salvation depend ultimately on man himself, saving faith being viewed throughout as man's own work and, because his own, not God's in him."

The Rejection Of Arminianism By The Synod Of Dort And The Formation Of The Five Points Of Calvinism.

A national Synod was called to meet in Dort in 1618 for the purpose of examining the views of Arminius in the light of Scripture. The Great Synod was convened by the States-General of Holland on November 13, 1618. There were 84 members and 18 secular commissioners. Included were 27 delegates from Germany, the Palatinate, Switzerland and England. There were 154 sessions held during the seven months that the Synod met to consider these matters, the last of which was on May 9, 1619.

The Synod had given a very close examination to the "five points" which had been advanced by the Remonstrants, and had compared the teaching advanced in them with the testimony of Scripture. Failing to reconcile that teaching with the Word of God, which they had definitely declared could alone be accepted by them as the rule of faith, they had unanimously rejected them. They felt, however, that a mere rejection was not sufficient. It remained for them to set forth the true Calvinistic teaching in relationship to those matters which had been called into question. This they proceeded to do, embodying the Calvinistic position in five chapters which have ever since been known as "the five points of Calvinism." The name Calvinism was derived from the great French reformer, John Calvin (1509-1564), who had done so much in expounding and defending these views.

No doubt it will seem strange to many in our day that the Synod of Dort rejected as heretical the five doctrines advanced by the Arminians, for these doctrines have gained wide acceptance in the modern Church. In fact, they are seldom questioned in our generation. But the vast majority of the Protestant theologians of that day took a much different view of the matter. They maintained that the Bible set forth a system of doctrine quite different from that advocated by the Arminian party. Salvation was viewed by the members of the Synod as a work of grace from beginning to end; in no sense did they believe that the sinner saved himself or contributed to his salvation. Adam's fall had completely ruined the race. All men were by nature spiritually dead and their wills were in bondage to sin and Satan. The ability to believe the gospel was itself a gift from God, bestowed only upon those whom He had chosen to be the objects of His unmerited favor. It was not man, but God, who determined which sinners would be shown mercy and saved. This, in essence, is what the members of the Synod of Dort understood the Bible to teach.

In the chart which follows, the five points of Arminianism (rejected by the Synod) and the five points of Calvinism (set forth by the Synod) are given, side by side, so that it might be readily seen wherein and to what extent these two systems of doctrine differ.

THE "FIVE POINTS" OF ARMINIANISM	THE "FIVE POINTS" OF CALVINISM
<p>1. Free Will or Human Ability Although human nature was seriously affected by the fall, man has not been left in a state of total spiritual helplessness. God graciously enables every sinner to repent and believe, but He does not interfere with man's freedom. Each sinner possesses a free will, and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it. Man's freedom consists of his ability to choose good over evil in spiritual matters; his will is not enslaved to his sinful nature. The sinner has the power to either cooperate with God's Spirit and be regenerated or resist God's grace and perish. The lost sinner needs the Spirit's assistance, but he does not have to be regenerated by the Spirit before he can believe, for faith is man's act and precedes the new birth. Faith is the sinner's gift to God; it is man's contribution to salvation.</p>	<p>1. Total Inability or Total Depravity Because of the fall, man is unable of himself to savingly believe the gospel. The sinner is dead, blind, and deaf to the things of God; his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt. His will is not free, it is in bondage to his evil nature, therefore, he will not — indeed he cannot — choose good over evil in the spiritual realm. Consequently, it takes much more than the Spirit's assistance to bring a sinner to Christ — it takes regeneration by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature. Faith is not something man contributes to salvation but is itself a part of God's gift of salvation— it is God's gift to the sinner, not the sinner's gift to God.</p>
<p>2. Conditional Election God's choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world was based upon His foreseeing that they would respond to His call. He selected only those whom He knew would of themselves freely believe the gospel. Election therefore was determined by or conditioned upon what man would do. The faith which God foresaw and upon which He based His choice was not given to the sinner by God (it was not created by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit) but resulted solely from man's will. It was left entirely up to man as to who would believe and therefore as to who would be elected unto salvation. God chose those whom He knew would, of their own free will, choose Christ. Thus the sinner's choice of Christ, not God's choice of the sinner, is the ultimate cause of salvation.</p>	<p>2. Unconditional Election God's choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely in His own sovereign will. His choice of particular sinners was not based on any foreseen response or obedience on their part, such as faith, repentance, etc. On the contrary, God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected. These acts are the result, not the cause God's choice. Election therefore was not determined by or conditioned upon any virtuous quality or act foreseen in man. Those whom God sovereignly elected He brings through the power of the Spirit to a willing acceptance of Christ. Thus God's choice of the sinner, not the sinner's choice of Christ, is the ultimate cause of salvation.</p>
<p>3. Universal Redemption or General Atonement Christ's redeeming work made it possible for everyone to be saved but did not actually secure the salvation of anyone. Although Christ died for all men and for every man, only those who believe on Him</p>	<p>3. Particular Redemption or Limited Atonement Christ's redeeming work was intended to save the elect only and actually secured salvation for them. His death was a substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin in the place of certain specified</p>

<p>are saved. His death enabled God to pardon sinners on the condition that they believe, but it did not actually put away anyone's sins. Christ's redemption becomes effective only if man chooses to accept it.</p>	<p>sinners. In addition to putting away the sins of His people, Christ's redemption secured everything necessary for their salvation, including faith which unites them to Him. The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, therefore guaranteeing their salvation.</p>
<p>4. The Holy Spirit Can Be Effectually Resisted The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are called outwardly by the gospel invitation; He does all that He can to bring every sinner to salvation. But inasmuch as man is free, he can successfully resist the Spirit's call. The Spirit cannot regenerate the sinner until he believes; faith (which is man's contribution) precedes and makes possible the new birth. Thus, man's free will limits the Spirit in the application of Christ's saving work. The Holy Spirit can only draw to Christ those who allow Him to have His way with them. Until the sinner responds, the Spirit cannot give life. God's grace, therefore, is not invincible; it can be, and often is, resisted and thwarted by man.</p>	<p>4. The Efficacious Call of the Spirit or Irresistible Grace In addition to the outward general call to salvation which is made to everyone who hears the gospel, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. The eternal call (which is made to all without distinction) can be, and often is, rejected; whereas the internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion. By mean, of this special call the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ. He is not limited in His work of applying salvation by man's will, nor is He dependent upon man's cooperation for success. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent. to come freely and willingly to Christ. God', grace. therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.</p>
<p>5. Falling From Grace Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their faith. etc.</p> <p>(All Arminians, have not been agreed on this point; some have held that believers are eternally secure in Christ — that once a sinner is regenerated he can never be lost.)</p>	<p>5. Perseverance of the Saints All who are chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit are eternally saved. They are kept in faith by the power of Almighty God and thus persevere to the end.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">According to Arminianism:</p> <p>Salvation is accomplished through the combined efforts of <i>God</i> (who takes the initiative) and <i>man</i> (who must respond)—man's response being the determining factor. God has provided salvation for everyone, but His provision becomes effective only for those who, of their own free will, "choose" to cooperate with Him and accept His offer of grace. At the crucial point, man's will plays a decisive role; thus man, not God, determines who will be the recipients of the gift of salvation.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">REJECTED by the Synod of Dort</p> <p>This was the system of thought contained in the "Remonstrance" (though the "five points" were not originally arranged in this order). It was submitted by the Arminians to the Church of Holland in 1610 for adoption but was rejected by the Synod of Dort in 1619 on the ground that it was unscriptural.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">According to Calvinism:</p> <p>Salvation is accomplished by the almighty power of the Triune God. The Father chose a people, the Son died for them, the Holy Spirit makes Christ's death effective by bringing the elect to faith and repentance, thereby causing them to willingly obey the gospel. The entire process (election, redemption, regeneration) is the work of God and is by grace alone. Thus <i>God</i>, not man, determines who will be the recipients of the gift of salvation.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">REAFFIRMED by the Synod of Dort</p> <p>This system of theology was reaffirmed by the Synod of Dort in 1619 as the doctrine of salvation contained in the Holy Scriptures. The system was at that time formulated into "five points" (in answer to the five points submitted by the Arminians) and has ever since been known as "the five points of Calvinism."</p>

What GCF Believes About The Five Points of Calvinism:

Total Depravity (Total Inability – Radical Corruption)

Man sins by choice and by the motivation of his corrupt nature. By nature we violate God's holy law and this sin makes man hostile towards God (Ecc 9:3; Rom 8:7). No one can escape the reaches of sin (Rom 3:23). There is nothing more evil and wicked than the heart of man (Jer 17:9). Because of sin, man cannot even choose to do good (Rom 7:18; 8:7). All are spiritually dead and slaves to their sinful desires (Jn 8:34, Eph 2:1-3; Rom 5:12). Man does not possess the ability to overcome this evil nature on his own (Jer 13:23); nor can he discern the things of God for they are foolishness to the lost (1 Cor 2:14). Man will never seek God without Divine intervention (Rom 3:11). In his fallen state there is nothing man could do to save himself apart from God's mercy, thus the Lord is not required to save anyone. (Rom 9:16).

Unconditional Election (Sovereign Choice)

Because of his total depravity it is impossible for man to save himself (Jn 6:44,65). Save for the grace of God, humanity would be eternally damned (Eph 2:4-5). Therefore, God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, chose certain individuals unto salvation. He chose them before time, according to His sovereign will (Eph 1:4-6; 2 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 1:9). God elected some to receive mercy in order that He may be glorified (Rom 9:23). He did not elect believers because he foresaw that they would choose Him, rather, He chose them according to His good pleasure (Rom 8:28-30). Election therefore was not determined by or conditioned upon any virtuous quality or act foreseen in man. In choosing some to receive undeserved mercy, the Lord chose that others would receive justice for their sin and rebellion (Rom 9:17-18; 11:7-8). This is the perfectly just thing for God to do (Gen 18:25). Man can do nothing to affect God's choice (Rom 9:16). Thus God's choice of the sinner, not the sinner's choice of Christ, is the cause of salvation.

Limited Atonement (Definite Atonement)

Christ's sacrifice was designed specifically for the redemption of His people - His sheep (Jn 10:14-16). His sacrifice didn't just make salvation possible – it guaranteed the salvation of the elect (Matt 20:28). Christ death was sufficient for all sins but efficient only for His children's sins. Christ died for the invisible Church (Eph 5:25). In addition to putting away the sins of His people, Christ's redemption secured everything necessary for their salvation; including faith, which unites them to Him (Eph 2:8,9). Christ's death was the perfect and complete sacrifice. When Jesus said, "It is finished" - He meant it – the sins of His children were paid for.

Irresistible Grace (Effectual Grace)

Christ taught that all whom God has elected will come to a knowledge of Him (Jn 6:37). They cannot resist the bestowing of God's grace upon them – nor would they want to. Man does not open his heart to receive Christ; rather, Christ opens his heart so that He may enter (Acts 16:14). All whom God elects believe in Him (Acts 13:48). The elect are not born again because they believe; they believe because they are born again by grace (1 Jn 5:1). The result of God's irresistible grace is the most certain response by the elect to the internal call, when the external call of the Gospel is given (Acts 9:4-6). The external call (which is made to all without distinction) can be, and often is, rejected; whereas the internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected. Through this special call, the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners willingly to Christ.

Perseverance of the Saints (Preservation of the Saints)

All who are chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit are eternally saved. They are kept in faith by the power of Almighty God (Jude 24) and persevere to the end. God promises to never let His elect turn away from Him (Jer 32:40). His gift of salvation is irrevocable (Rom 11:29). He will not lose even one of those who were chosen (Jn 6:39; 10:28-29). God promises to finish what He began in the elect (Phil 1:6). Those who 'fall away' were never saved, or are Prodigal Sons who will be disciplined by God (1 Jn 2:19, Lk 15:). Salvation is never an excuse for sin (Gal 5:13). Nothing can separate God's true children from Him (Rom 8:38-39).