

The six points of Calvinism

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Many people have heard of the “five points of Calvinism,” summarized in the acronym TULIP. Here I present the same ideas restated in somewhat more modern language. The problem with the old TULIP phrasing is that many or most of the words used in that acronym are difficult for people today to understand accurately—those of us who hold to a Calvinistic interpretation of Scripture have to spend a fair amount of time explaining away wrong understandings of those words. So here is my updated version, which is also slightly expanded to include elements I think are crucial in all modern Calvinist thinking. I even was able to make a cute acronym, which is quite appropriate: CALVIN.

Comprehensive brokenness. This used to be called “total depravity.” In many people’s minds, that means “as wicked as possible.” That is not what that Calvinism teaches. The correct teaching is that sin is *comprehensive* in our lives—there is no part of us that is untouched by sin, no part of us that we can trust to be good enough to solve our problems on our own. The word *brokenness* also conveys a wider scope than the word sin; sometimes the word *fallenness* is also used (though this latter is not a very widely understood word outside the church). Brokenness means that our problem is not only our evil choices, which may be termed sins, but also effects of evil on us by forces outside our choice: imperfect thinking (we cannot use our intellect to save ourselves), inherited behaviors (our parents, going all the way back to Adam, have given us patterns of behavior that we cannot avoid), desires of our physical nature that are out of control, etc.

The main point of this term is that there is nothing in us—not free choice, not rationality, not an inner glimmer of light—that can save us. The Bible says “There is no one who is good, no not one, no one who understands, no one who seeks after God.” (Romans 3:10-11). We are helpless, in our natural state, to change ourselves to be good; we are naturally enemies of God. (Colossians 1:21)

Absolute Sovereignty. This next point conveys the gist of the U in the old TULIP: “unconditional election.” In this point Calvinists insist that the Bible tells us God’s actions are *absolutely* not dependent on anything we do or choose. “ ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Romans 9:15-16). God is the initiator of our salvation, that is, the undoing of our brokenness. This point is obvious if you accept the “C”—that we are unable to save ourselves, because our brokenness is comprehensive. God does not look to us to see if we can provide for him some reason to save us, because apart from his working, there is nothing good in us that is adequate. He is the *sovereign*, or king, who gives out what he wants, to whom he wants.

Lifegiving Union. This point is not explicitly in the old TULIP, but is the teaching of all Calvinist theologians: regeneration (a theological word for *new life*) precedes faith, and this new life comes about by the work of the Holy Spirit to *unite* us to Christ. Almost all Christians would agree that those who come to Christ are united to him with new life, also known as being “born again.” But some would say that this new life comes *after* we produce faith on our own; in other

words, God *rewards* us for our faith, or *responds* to our faith with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Calvinists insist that our faith itself is created by God through the work of the Spirit; apart from his work, the last thing we would want to do would be to want to have faith in God, and so the Holy Spirit must change our hearts to make us want to follow him:

“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Romans 8:7-10).

“By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8).

The importance of faith is not that it is a great work that impresses God. Its importance is that it is the first (and only necessary) evidence of a new heart which God has created in us, by which we are definitely and really connected to Christ in a spiritual union, so that all that is ours (our sin) is his, and all that belongs to him (his eternal life and his perfect righteousness) is ours.

Verified Atonement. This was called “limited atonement” in the old TULIP; often today it is called “definite atonement,” but I really wanted a “V” for the CALVIN acronym, plus I think “verified” conveys more of the meaning Calvinists intend.

All Christians agree that the essence of the work of God to save us was done on the Cross by Christ when he died— this work is called the *atonement*, which carries the meaning of paying the penalty for our sins. Some Christians present the view that Christ’s death only “hypothetically” paid for our sins—that is, his work on the Cross remains ineffective until we respond to it in faith. Again, the emphasis in that view is that God responds to, or rewards, our faith, in this case in the application of the atonement itself. Calvinists insist that salvation is from God from start to finish. As such, Christ’s death is definitely, actually effective for all those who in fact will be saved, and not just hypothetically or potentially. Romans 5:8-10 says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.... while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.” It does not say that we were “potentially” reconciled. It says that while we were still enemies (i.e., had no faith, and hated God) he died for us, and his death actually, really reconciled us to God. It was atonement in truth, i.e. veracity, not merely in potentiality.

Like the “A” and the “L”, this point also follows from the “C”. If you believe that there is nothing in us that is good enough to save us, to which God could respond, then all of salvation is from God. God sends his Holy Spirit (the “L”) and has the Son die for us (the “V”) all in advance of our doing or believing anything, out of his free and unfettered mercy (the “A”).

Irresistable Grace. This is the same phrase as in the TULIP. It means that what God does, we cannot undo, or resist. He changes our hearts to receive his grace and we respond. This should be a tremendous comfort, that we cannot sin so much that we actually stop the work God is doing, and fall out of his grace. “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring

it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). Again, if we see all of salvation as from God from start to finish, it makes sense that God has the ability to see it through.

Never-ending Adoption. This was called “perseverance of the saints” in the old TULIP. In many ways it expresses the same idea as the “I”, that our relation to God is never in doubt. However, the “I” focuses on our work—that we are unable to stop God’s work. The “N” (or old “P”) focuses on God’s work, namely, that he will never change his mind and stop doing that work, dropping us from his list of children. This permanent relationship is often called *adoption* in the Bible, which conveys a definite, permanent relationship—God does not “unadopt” us one day if we mess up, and then adopt us again if we get better, then unadopt us again, etc.

“You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:15-17).

This adoption looks forward to a future inheritance, which is called *glorification* in Scripture. We will go to heaven, and there we will be transformed to be like Christ.

“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:29-31)

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