

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Winter 2013 No. 127

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM?

By Lee Gatiss

People often speak about the “five points of Calvinism.” Now I want to make it clear right from the start, that I don’t believe in five point Calvinism. I am not a five point Calvinist.

Please don’t jump to any conclusions. I have more to say!

I believe that God loves his world. Psalm 145:9 says “The LORD is good to all, and his mercies are over all his works.” In Matthew 5:44-45, Jesus tells us to love our enemies, so that we will be like our Father. So I believe in the universal love of God.

I passionately believe that we should evangelise the whole world. We should be promiscuous about it. Everybody needs to hear about Jesus, and whoever comes to him he will never drive away.

Jesus’ blood is so precious that it would be blasphemous to say it wasn’t completely sufficient to pay for the sins of anybody. He’s the saviour of the world. I don’t believe that God has limited the power of the atonement. What Jesus did on the cross is the most powerful thing in the universe!

I believe sin has affected people to their very core. But people are not as bad as they could be. The Fall has affected us, but that doesn’t mean we have no capacity to make choices. I don’t believe that what we do in this life is irrelevant and makes no difference to God. I believe we have to put our faith into action, or it is just dead faith.

We are not robots. God has not predetermined everything so that we don’t need to use our minds and our hands to get out there and work for him. I think it is heretical to use the doctrine of predestination as an excuse for being lazy.

Now, you may think at this point that I am not what you expected! But I wanted you to hear me affirm with all my heart the things which you might think a Calvinist would only say defensively, or things you might think a Calvinist wouldn’t say at all.

OK, so what did I mean? First, I said I’m not a five point Calvinist. Well, what is five point Calvinism? It’s usually defined using the English acronym TULIP: total depravity; unconditional election; limited atonement; irresistible grace; perseverance of the saints.

I can’t find these five things listed in Calvin’s *Institutes*. Calvin doesn’t seem to have a section on “the five points.” And strangely, in my edition of his *Institutes*, he doesn’t even get to talking about predestination until about page 900.

And that’s my point. Calvin himself said so much more than just five points. So following him would mean believing in 20 points, or maybe 100 points. Where’s the doctrine of the Trinity in these “five points”? And yet you couldn’t say you were following Calvin if you were an anti-Trinitarian.

Where’s the doctrine of the sacraments in the five points? And yet Calvin spent huge amounts of his time writing about the Lord’s Supper and baptism.

Surely Calvin was a Protestant Reformer? So he believed in *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura* -

salvation by faith alone, through grace alone, and the authority of scripture alone. But they are not mentioned in the so-called five points.

So I'm not a 5 point Calvinist, because Calvinism is about so much more than just these five points. Maybe I could say I'm a twelve point Calvinist?

But if we're going to boil it all down, why not be a one point Calvinist? I believe that "God saves sinners."

When it comes to salvation, it's God who does it. Not me doing my best and God accepting that. Not God doing his part and me doing mine. *God* saves.

He doesn't save people who are worthy: God saves *sinners*. He doesn't look into the future and see I will be a worthy person and therefore save me on the basis of my great potential. No, God saves sinners.

He doesn't make salvation possible. He actually *saves* people. He didn't just make it possible IF I add my own hard work and faith. He came to save me, and save me he has. One point Calvinism: God saves sinners.

However, Calvin didn't invent all these abbreviations. He wasn't the only theologian to believe all these points. And he certainly wasn't the first to talk about predestination and such things. So the label "Calvin-ist" is misleading.

A better label would be "Reformed." When we talk about Reformed theology, we're talking about the kind of soteriology (doctrine of salvation) and the kind of sacramentology and the kind of Trinitarianism that was shared by Calvin and many other Reformers in the 16th century, such as our very own Thomas Cranmer, and others such as Bullinger, Bucer, Vermigli, Perkins, and Beza. They were French, German, Italian, English.

So, I don't believe in five point Calvinism. I believe in the Bible. I believe God saves sinners. But if you want more than that, I believe the Bible is best summarised in a broad tradition of theology called Reformed, which yes, includes Calvin, but was certainly not started by him and is certainly not limited to him.

Now, where does this TULIP come from? Well, it's supposed to be a summary of the teaching of the Dutch Synod of Dort (1618-1619). The Dutch love tulips; it seems appropriate. But the acronym TULIP wasn't invented until about 400 years after the Synod. And though it's funny, and clever in a way, in other ways it's extremely unhelpful.

Often, people who believe the things affirmed at Dort have to spend so long explaining what they mean by *total* depravity and *limited* atonement, that it's not really a helpful shorthand. (Total depravity doesn't mean we're as bad as we could be; limited atonement doesn't limit the cross's power).

One of the objections to the Reformed view of the atonement is this: if Jesus only came to save those given to him by the Father, then what's the point of evangelising everybody?

This is a strange objection, for this reason: nobody thinks that everybody is elect. The Reformed think God elects people in eternity and sends Jesus to save those people, who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit, who preserves them and gets them to glory.

The Arminian, or non-Reformed, view is that God elects people on the basis of foreseeing their faith. That is, God looks into the future and says, “Oh look, Lee is going to have faith in me. Argyris is not. So I will elect Lee.” If you don’t believe, you don’t get saved. And if you’re not saved, you’re not elect.

So the point is: both Reformed and non-Reformed think there’s only a limited number of people in heaven. So only a limited number of people are elect. And the (faulty) logic says that if not all are elect, we can’t preach to everyone.

So this argument, usually used against Reformed doctrine, actually works against Arminianism as well. If limited atonement means we can’t evangelise everyone, then so does limited election, and limited ultimate salvation.

The Thirty-nine Articles say the basis for our actions is the revealed will of God, not his eternal plan. So if he tells us to evangelise the world, to be holy, to love - we evangelise all, we work hard at sanctification, and we make an effort to love people. We don’t ever say, “Well, Lord, you chose me before the foundation of the world. So it doesn’t matter if I obey you or not.”

As John Stott used to pray, “May your written word be our rule.” We do what he says, as our Lord. But the word also reveals to us that he is a sovereign Lord. He’s in charge. So we know whatever WE do, HE remains in the driving seat. His will is done.

God’s grand plan is revealed to us as a comfort and an encouragement. It is not revealed to us so that we can draw wrong conclusions from it, which overturn his explicit commands.

We could look at it this way: from an earthly perspective, it’s fine for us to say that the sun rises and sets. We know, from a divine perspective, that it’s the earth which actually rotates around the sun. In the same way, it’s fine from our human perspective to say, ‘whoever believes will be saved.’ Yet we also know from the scriptures that God intended from the start only to finally save the elect.

We have both views, but must be careful not to confuse them. We don’t know who is elect and who is not. So if the word says preach to all, we preach to all, even if we cannot reconcile in our heads how indiscriminate preaching can be reconciled with equally clear teaching on God’s ultimate sovereignty.

Our job is not to make it all into an intellectual jigsaw puzzle. Our job is to live and die for the spread of the gospel and the glory of God, confident that God will save sinners.

That’s why, in the end, Reformed theology is not about Calvin, or Cranmer. It’s not about TULIPs. It’s about God, his glory, and his grace. Now that is something we can believe in.

This is a shortened version of a lecture given at the Greek Bible College in Athens, October 2012.

Lee Gatiss is Director of Church Society