

The Five Points of Calvinism and Covenant Theology

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In recent years, there has been a recovery of the five points of Calvinism among many evangelicals, but there has not been a concomitant revival of the covenant theology of seventeenth century Puritanism as the rich soil in which Calvinistic soteriology grows. This post will not attempt to thoroughly defend every doctrine mentioned, but to show the connection between Calvinism and the theological covenants of covenant theology. The Synod of Dordt listed the five points of Calvinism, not in their contemporary order of “TULIP,” but in the order of “ULTIP,” which is the order I’ll be using here.

1. Unconditional Election. The eternal decree of unconditional election is the foundation of covenant theology and the doctrine of salvation. God chooses to save sinners not because of any foreseen goodness or conditions in them, but merely because of His good pleasure to redeem a people for Himself to bring Him glory. Speaking of unconditional divine election, Paul writes, “So then it depends not on human will or exertion but on God, who has mercy” (Romans 9:16). There are no conditions in God’s choosing individuals for salvation. God’s choice is based entirely upon His sovereign will: “He has mercy on whomever He wills and He hardens whomever He wills” (Romans 9:18).

2. Limited Atonement. Limited atonement might be better termed “particular redemption” or “definite atonement.” It means that Christ’s death is absolutely effective to save, purchasing every life blessing for His chosen people, including new birth, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, as well as an enduring holy life (Rom 8:31-39). Hebrews 9:12 tells us that Christ accomplished salvation for His people, “by means of His own blood, thus securing eternal redemption.” Notice Christ’s blood “secures” redemption. It doesn’t just make redemption possible, but actually secures redemption. His blood secures “eternal” redemption, not temporary redemption. And it secures “redemption.” That is, the blood of Christ actually redeems and doesn’t merely make a provision for redemption. Since only a limited number of people are redeemed, we must conclude that Christ died only to save His chosen people. And this is in fact what the Scriptures teach. Matthew 1:21 says, “He will save His people from their sins.” In John 10:15, Jesus says, “I lay down my life for the sheep.” In John 17:9, Jesus says, “I am not praying for the world, but for those whom you have given me.” Christ’s priestly work of atonement and prayer is limited to the elect alone.

So, what does this have to do with covenant theology? Covenant theology views “limited atonement” as rooted in the eternal “covenant of redemption” between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect. In this eternal covenant (an aspect of the eternal decree), the Father appointed the Son to enter into this world, to fulfill the law of God, to die for His chosen people, and to rise from the dead. The Son agreed to accomplish the Father’s will (John 17:4). A covenant is “an agreement between two or more persons;” therefore, it is proper to view this agreement between the Father and the Son covenantally. Based on this eternal covenant, or agreement, between the Father and the Son, the Son came into the world, kept the law of God and accomplished the redemption of the elect in time (2 Timothy 1:9-10). The whole of Isaiah 53 is about Christ’s temporal obedience to this eternal covenant of redemption, and Isaiah 54:10 explicitly calls it the “covenant of peace.”

3. Total Depravity. Total Depravity refers to the fact that human beings are born depraved in mind,

heart, and will. Sinners are not as depraved as they can possibly be, but they are truly depraved in every aspect of their persons. The result of total depravity is that no natural person will ever seek God, embrace the gospel, or do any absolute good whatsoever. Romans 3:10-11 explains total depravity: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” Similarly, Isaiah 64:7 says, “There is no one who calls upon your name, no one who rouses himself to take hold of you.” Therefore, no human being can do anything toward his own salvation. Natural men are completely lost and without hope in themselves. They will not choose Christ. They will not come to Him.

In terms of covenant theology, the “total depravity” of fallen humanity is the result of Adam’s violation of the “covenant of works.” In the beginning, God created Adam as a bearer of the divine image and as a covenantal representative (federal head) of all humanity. As God’s image, Adam was created to love and enjoy God. God lovingly wrote His good law on Adam’s heart, which taught Adam how to love to God and others (Romans 2:14). God promised eternal life to Adam for obedience (Genesis 3:22), but He also threatened eternal death to Adam and his posterity for disobedience (Genesis 2:17). Because Adam disobeyed God by failing to love God and by breaking His law, God cursed Adam and all who descend from him by natural generation with eternal death. Paul writes, “Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). The curse of death means that Adam’s natural descendants inherit totally depraved natures that have no desire for the true God and no desire to come to Him for salvation and life. “In Adam all die” (1 Corinthians 15:22). Therefore, because of Adam’s failure in the “covenant of works,” all humanity is cursed with “total depravity.”

4. Irresistible Grace and Perseverance of the Saints. These two aspects of the five points of Calvinism go together.

“Irresistible grace,” or “effective/effectual grace” as it is sometimes called, means that God effectively brings His chosen people to salvation. Without such effective saving grace, even God’s chosen people would resist salvation to their deaths because they all inherited fallen and depraved natures from Adam.

“Perseverance of the saints” means that God effectively causes His chosen people to remain saved and live holy lives.

Irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints are logically necessary in light of the fallen natures of human beings. Because human beings are totally depraved and because they are totally unable to do anything to bring themselves to God, the only way for them to be saved and remain saved is for God to provide a powerful, conquering kind of grace that overcomes all natural human resistance to first and final salvation.

The Scriptures frequently link “irresistible grace” and “perseverance of the saints.” Jesus said, “And this is the will of Him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day” (John 6:39) and “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:40). Also, Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all and no one

is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:27-29).

In covenant theology, the doctrines of irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints are blessings of the "covenant of grace." God made the covenant of grace with His elect people to save them from their sins. All the blessings of the covenant of grace are the purchase of Christ's work in the covenant of redemption. In the covenant of redemption, Christ accomplished redemption. In the covenant of grace, the Holy Spirit applies the redemption Christ accomplished.

And what are the blessings of the covenant of grace? Jeremiah 31:31-34 is quoted in Hebrews 8:10-12, and it teaches that God irresistibly draws his people to Himself: "I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God and they will be my people" (Hebrews 8:10). Notice that God is the one who acts to convert the hearts of His people. He says "I will" do these things. In the covenant of grace, God irresistibly draws His people to salvation.

The covenant of grace also provides the blessing of perseverance. Hebrews says, "They shall not teach each one his neighbor and each one his brother saying, 'know the Lord,' for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more" (Hebrews 8:11-12). God preserves all members of the covenant of grace in the knowledge of Himself. He also forgives their sins.

Therefore, the covenant of grace provides the blessings of irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints to those God chose for salvation from the foundation of the world.

In closing, the Bible's covenant theology demonstrates that the five points of Calvinism are not a narrow teaching of the Bible, limited to certain proof texts or to an aspect of systematic theology. The five points of Calvinism are deeply rooted in the very superstructure of the Bible, which means that the whole of Scripture is about the glorious doctrines of God's sovereign redeeming grace.

For more information on the covenant or federal theology of 17th century Baptists, see *Covenant Theology*, edited by Earl Blackburn, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology* by Pascal Denault, and *Covenant Theology: From Adam to Christ* by Nehemiah Coxe and John Owen.