

The Doctrines of Grace

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In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Reformed churches were troubled by the errors of Arminianism. James Arminius (1560-1609), who had studied at Geneva under Theodore Beza (Calvin's colleague and successor), became a preacher at Amsterdam and eventually a professor at the University of Leyden. Through his sermons and lectures, he made it increasingly clear that he had adopted new views which were at variance with both Scripture and the Reformed Faith.

Disputes therefore arose during his life-time, but it was after his death, in 1610, that his followers drew up a petition called a 'Remonstrance' which set forth their teachings in five articles. These were finally presented to the National Synod of Dort (which included delegates from other countries, even from England). The Synod condemned the doctrines of Arminius and set forth the true Reformed theology in five other articles, which ever since have been called 'The Five Points of Calvinism'. In brief, these are as follows:

(1) Total Depravity. This doctrine asserts that, as a result of the Fall, men are alienated from God, subject to the corrupting power of sin, and in a totally helpless and hopeless condition.

Adam daringly violated God's command at the suggestion of the devil. That first act of disobedience - called 'the offence' or, more literally, 'the stumbling' or 'the fall' (Rom 5:15) - exposed Adam's posterity to guilt and punishment: 'By the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation' (Rom 5:18 cf. vv. 12, 15ff). It also exposed them to participation in inherent depravity. Sin's penalty dissolving the bond of communion between God and men, brought about the loss of the divine favour and a consequent dreadful change in human nature.

As Jeremiah wrote, 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?' (Jer 17:9; cf. Gen 6:5; 8:21; Mk 7:21-23)

The Reformed doctrine is 'total depravity'. By this is meant that corruption has extended to all our spiritual faculties and powers. Our minds are now so darkened that we fail to perceive spiritual truth (Eph 4:18; 1 Cor 2:14); disordered affections cause us to hate the very One we should love (Rom 1:30; Jn 15:25); enslaved wills resolutely and persistently refuse all divine overtures (Lk 19:14; Jn 5:40); defiled consciences render us immune to feelings of guilt and shame (Isa 5:20; Titus 1:15); and faulty memories quickly lose more serious thoughts of God and eternity (Deut 32:18; Heb 2:1).

So what happens when the Gospel is preached? Such is our total moral perversion that we inevitably fail to make a proper, believing response. Indeed, it is true to say that sin has rendered us incapable of making the right choice. We cannot turn to Christ. Hence, the apostle John observes of some that 'they could not believe'; and, in another place, he records the words of the Lord Himself, who said, 'No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him' (Jn 12:39; 6:44,65).

In the Gospel, men and women are commanded to believe the Truth; but although they still have a faculty capable of receiving it, yet that faculty has been tragically impaired so that they always reject it. Does this mean that they are not responsible for their unbelief? Certainly not! This inability of theirs to believe is not innocent: it is criminal. It arises from a depraved and wicked heart. Hence Scripture attributes guilt to unbelief and the most terrible condemnation is passed upon it. 'He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed on the name of the only begotten Son of God' (Jn 3:18; cf. 15:22; 16:9).

In a classic statement on depravity the Westminster theologians say: 'Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being wholly averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or prepare himself thereunto' (Conf. ix. 3).

(2) Unconditional Election. By this is meant that God, from all eternity, has sovereignly elected some sinners to be saved through Jesus Christ; and this election was not in foresight of belief or holiness in sinners, but solely on account of free and distinguishing grace.

If the human condition is as desperate as we have described, then it follows that salvation must originate, not with men, but with God. What do the Scriptures actually teach about this? They teach that, notwithstanding man's culpable helplessness, God has decided to save many sinners and bring them into the full enjoyment of everlasting life. This involves a divine act of choice in relation to them, by which they are distinguished from others, which explains the familiar biblical emphasis: 'Blessed is the man whom thou chooseth...' (Ps 65:4); 'God hath... chosen you' (2 Thess 2:12).

Now, such an important matter was not left undetermined and indefinite. God's choice of persons was made into a formal decree - 'the purpose of God according to election' (Rom 9:11); and since all God's decrees are eternal (there being no change or succession in the divine mind), it is clear that the election of sinners took place 'from the beginning', even 'before the foundation of the world' (2 Thess 2:12; Eph 1:4; cf. 2 Tim 1:9).

As for its cause, it is to be found in God's absolute sovereignty and supreme will (Eph 1:5, 9, 11). He determined - without reference to anything good foreseen in individuals - who should be the objects of his special favour and kindness; and, then, as John Trapp quaintly says, 'whom he chose for his love, he loved for his choice'. This was indeed an 'election of grace (or, unmerited favour)' (Rom 11:5). Elsewhere, God declares with reference to his choice (or election) of persons: 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy' (Rom 9:15; cf. 9:23; Ps 103:11; 1 Pet 1:2, 3). This twin concept of 'mercy' is important. If 'mercy' be understood to mean 'affectionate pity to such as are in misery and distress', it suggests that, in his electing decree, God viewed men not only as without merit but as full of demerit. In other words, he viewed them as fallen, guilty, and perishing sinners. While all might have been justly left to the penalty of their sins (as some indeed were), God mercifully elected many of the fallen race

to an everlasting salvation. 'For God hath not appointed us to wrath but to obtain salvation' (1 Thess 5:9; cf. Matt 24:31; 25:34; 2 Tim 2:10). Election, therefore, begins in God's sovereign good pleasure and it ends in his peoples' deliverance from evil and possession of good. 'Salvation is of the Lord' (Jonah 2:10).

In his decree, God also ordained the means by which election would be carried into effect. These may be said to be 'meritorious' and 'instrumental'.

By the former, we understand that, in election, God purposed to save sinners through the person and work of his Son. He was first chosen as Redeemer: then sinners were chosen 'in him' (Eph 1:4; cf. Rom 16:13); which means, as Thomas Goodwin helpfully explains, that 'in the womb of election, he the Head came out first, and then we the members' (See also: Is 42:1; 1 Pet 1:19. 1 Thess 5:9; 2 Tim 1:9). By the latter, we understand that God also willed to bring elect sinners, through 'sanctification (or, setting apart) of the Spirit', to 'obedience (or, submission to the Gospel's way of salvation)' and 'sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ (or, application of its cleansing virtue to heart and conscience)' (1 Pet 1:1, 2; cf. 2 Thess 2:13). Thus, the whole of our salvation was embraced in the electing decree.

(3) Limited Atonement. Sometimes referred to as Particular Redemption, this simply affirms that Christ died to save the elect only and that he actually secured salvation for them.

By affirming this, we do not for a moment deny the intrinsic worth and sufficiency of Christ's atonement. His blood, after all, was the 'blood' of him who was 'God' and it was therefore capable of expiating all the sins of all men (Acts 20:28; Jn 3:14, 15; cf. Ps 130:7). We find ourselves in full agreement with Thomas Boston when he says, 'There was virtue and efficacy enough in his oblation to satisfy offended justice for the sins of the whole world, yea, and of millions of worlds more: for his blood hath infinite value, because of the infinite dignity of his person.' The question is not, then, about value or adequacy: it is about divine intention or design with respect to the subjects of the atonement. Against modern Arminians and

Amyraldians, we maintain that the Father delivered up the Son to suffer, bleed, and die for the elect and only for the elect.

What is the biblical evidence for this? First of all, the decree of election and the purpose of redemption are declared to be in perfect harmony. Christ performed his substitutionary work 'according to the will of God and our Father (Gal 1:4, 5; Rev 13:8). Secondly, as covenant Head, Christ satisfied justice only on behalf of the chosen, who were 'given' to him as his spiritual seed (Jn 6:38, 39; 17:10). Thirdly, Christ acted as a substitute, performing a service and paying a debt 'for', or 'on behalf of' others. Of necessity, his work must have been for a definite number of people (Jn 10:11; 1 Pet 2:21). Fourthly, such perfect satisfaction has been made by Christ to the justice of God that those for whom it was made will certainly be 'saved' (Rom 5:8-10; 1 Thess 1:10). Fifthly, both parts of Christ's priestly office, the offering of sacrifice and making of intercession, must be of equal extent; but our Lord clearly restricts his intercession to the 'elect' (Jn 17:9,24; Rom 8:33,34). Sixthly, as the typical redemption from Egypt was particular, involving only the children of Israel, so Christ's redemption is confined to the chosen, 'out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation' (Lk 1:68; Rev 5:9). Seventhly, and lastly, the Scriptures assure us that, at last, Christ will be 'satisfied' with the results of his death; but how can this ever be if multitudes of his redeemed ultimately and eternally perish? (Is 53:11; Jn 6:38, 39).

Let critics say what they will. We believe in an atonement which actually atones and in a redemption which effectively and wonderfully redeems!

(4) Irresistible Grace. Here, we are confronted with the fact that when God calls elect sinners to faith through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit effects such a change in them that, contrary to all expectations, they are brought to the reception of the truth, trust in the Saviour, and participation in His salvation.

If sinners are to come into the possession of this salvation, they must come into a relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ since it is 'with him' that 'all things' (i.e. all saving benefits) are

'freely given' (Rom 8:32; 1 Cor 1:30). So, in the Gospel, our Lord extends a sincere and gracious call to people everywhere. 'Come unto me', he says, 'and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out' (Matt 11:28-30; Jn 6:37). But there is an apparently insurmountable barrier to their coming. Such is their natural impotence and malignity, that no matter how winsome the invitation, they always firmly decline it. 'I would', says the loving Saviour, but 'ye would not' (Matt 23:37; cf. Jn 5:40). What is needed is a supernatural and efficacious work of divine power, producing a radical change in the sinner's state. And this, of course, is where the Holy Spirit comes in.

His internal and immediate work effects a transformation in the spiritual nature - intellect, affections, and will - and actually brings men to faith in the Lord Jesus. After making us see sin as it really is, he 'enlightens' us by removing the ignorance and prejudice from our minds and showing us the One who is able and willing to save; then, he 'renews' us, changing our dispositions and drawing out our desires to this blessed Saviour; and, finally, he 'makes us willing' to receive and trust him for forgiveness, acceptance, and eternal life (Eph 1:18; Ezek 11:19,20; Ps 110:3). In effecting this change, the Holy Spirit exerts omnipotent grace. Scripture teaches that we 'believe' through 'the working of his mighty power' (Eph 1:19; 2 Thess 1:11). Irresistible? Most certainly! The Holy Spirit performs an act of power in sinners as great as that which was performed in the creation of the universe. The Christian is 'a new creation'.

It only remains for us to observe here that this divine work only takes place in elect and redeemed sinners. 'Sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called...' (Jude 1; cf. Is 43:1; Rom 8:30; 1 Cor 1:26-29).

(5) Perseverance of the Saints. According to this final tenet, God so preserves true believers by his grace and power that they can never totally or finally fall away, but they persevere to the end and obtain everlasting life and glory.

If God did not ensure this, such is the corruption without and within us that we would inevitably fall away and lose our priceless benefits. He is therefore committed to 'keep' (literally, 'guard') us, granting us continually 'more grace' and 'the supply of the Spirit of Jesus

Christ' (1 Pet 1:5. James 4:6; Phil 1:19). In consequence, true believers are enabled to continue in holiness and obedience until their earthly course is finished. Writes Paul to the Philippians, 'He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ' (Phil 1:6).

The Lord Jesus Christ once said: 'This is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing' (Jn 6:39). Not one of the Lord's people, then, shall ever be allowed to perish. They will be kept perfectly safe in the everlasting love of an everlasting God (Jn 10:28, 29; Rom 8:38, 39).

While recognising that the Calvinistic Faith covers more than these 'Five Points', I believe these tenets do provide a useful epitome of Calvinistic teaching.

A Calvinistic church will hold to them most firmly; and a Calvinistic Minister will regularly and boldly preach on them, exposing and refuting the errors of popular Arminianism. As a result, our people will be grounded in the biblical and glorious Faith of the Reformation.