

Whither 5 Points

Are you an Arminian? Or a Calvinist? If you're a "Calvinist", are you a 3-pointer, 4-pointer, or 5-pointer?

A necessary background for this discussion, and many others, is the (minimum, not exhaustive) set of attributes belonging to God.

- He is omniscient. He knows all that is knowable.
- He is omnipotent. He has all power and control that can be; all other power is subordinate and subject to His.
- He is omnipresent. He is everywhere there is a "where", and not limited to the dimensions of the physical universe we presently inhabit.
- He is from everlasting to everlasting. He is eternal, before and after time itself.

Take away any of these attributes, and you take away the others.

- If He was not before and after all, that would diminish His omnipresence.
- If He is not omnipresent, He could not be omniscient, for some things could happen where He is not, such that He would not know of them.
- If He is not omniscient, He could not be omnipotent, for He could hardly control things about which He has no knowledge.
- If He is not omnipotent, He cannot bring to pass all that He designs. And, to boot, He is found a liar, for He has told us that He is in fact the God having all these attributes.
- While we're at it, God logically can only be One. He is not foreclosed from being a trinity, but there cannot be any other Gods (capital G) of comparable attributes, because, again, that would defeat for Him one or more of His attributes. There can be any inferior powers (gods, small g, whether angels, human judges, or idols) He allows, but only by His pleasure and/or sufferance.

God knows the end from the beginning. He knew you before creation, and He knows your end, and how you will get there. His foreknowledge is a necessary consequence, even a component, of His omniscience.

It's also necessary for us to acknowledge God's attributes of love and righteousness. Without His love (He even tells us He IS love), we have no basis for hope, for salvation. Without His righteousness, not only would we be confused regarding our need for salvation, but we could not trust Him regarding it.

Moving on now to our topic of 5-point Calvinism: For the sake of reference, for those of us who are not ready extemporaneously either to assail or to defend 5 points, I'll list them, according to the common English acronym TULIP.

- **Total depravity**
Briefly, this is the notion that man, in and of himself, is an incorrigible sinner and cannot come to God. It is not that he does not still bear the image of the Creator and may still have good qualities, but they do not avail to bring him to seek God. He is helpless.
- **Unconditional election**
(Again briefly,) this is the thought that God alone chooses upon whom He will show mercy to be able to believe, and then to believe, into Christ for salvation.
- **Limited atonement**
This doctrine essentially says (depending on the one who holds it) either that Christ's atoning work was sufficient only for the elect, OR that while it is sufficient for all the sins of all men, it is INTENDED only for the elect.
- **Irresistible grace**
The idea here is that God's grace is always effective for the sinner who is among the elect, by means of the Holy Spirit working in his heart to come to Christ of his own will. This is distinct from an outward call to believe the Gospel (as for instance the preaching of an evangelist), which may or may not be heeded.
- **Perseverance of the saints**
This is the belief that all believers into Christ shall not be lost by God, cannot become unsaved.

You may quarrel with my rendering of these terms, but this should give the general sense.

Now, I think there are a few comments appropriate at this juncture. The first is the historical recognition that these 5 points are the outcome of the Synod of Dort, which was held to deal with the points raised by followers of Jacob Arminius, known as the Remonstrants. Their corresponding beliefs, or at least points of discussion, were (more or less) as follows.

- Man is indeed totally depraved, and cannot come to God absent prevenient grace.
- Election is determined conditionally upon God's foreknowledge about the individual's choice.
- Christ's atonement is universal by intention, though not by effect.
- Grace is necessary but not irresistible.
- True saints can nonetheless by choice fall from grace into apostasy. Salvation can be lost.

One can easily see that resolving these doctrinal issues might well have merited such a meeting for such a purpose. But I additionally comment that I don't think those who were considering these matters, regardless of where they found themselves in respect of agreement, would have advocated the reduction of a theology to these points. And excessive concentration upon them appears to me to be reasoning from theology to Scripture rather than reasoning from Scripture to theology, as we ought. Following, I'll attempt to treat each point briefly – and say how you may “count” my agreement.

- I hope we all agree on the total depravity of man. We are all sinners, and absent God reaching to us, we'd have no hope of salvation. It is clear that without God's grace (however we characterize it), we would have no choice offered us, nor any understanding of the choice. As we recall from Ephesians 2:8-9, *For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.* **1 point.**
- In respect of unconditional election, we err if we believe that God *arbitrarily* chooses who will go to heaven and who to hell. While we with Paul agree that God is sovereign (Romans 9:19 and following) and is not unrighteous no matter how His decisions may appear to us, we ALSO know that God is love, that He loves us, and that we even read of His love for Lucifer, the son of the morning – who we know will be in eternal punishment. By all His attributes, God logically cannot NOT foreknow us, and determine our destiny. But we know He solicits us to choose Him, to come to Him. (Revelation 22:17, for but one place of many) We must reasonably understand God's election to be consonant with the exercise of free will He allows us. Yes, He has foreknowledge; He has indeed all the attributes we must necessarily ascribe to God. Must we assume He elects causally on the basis of foreknowledge? Or might we better agree with Peter (I Peter 1:2) that His election ACCORDS with His foreknowledge, which we might reasonably expect, and not assert causation in this place, as we think the Arminians do? God's attributes are His, not ours. We should not try to assign their operation beyond what the Bible informs us. **Depending on what's meant, 1 point or 0: 1/2 point?**
- Can we by any means believe in a limited atonement? I say No. All believers can agree that the Bible teaches some will experience the benefits of Christ's atonement and some will not. But it cheapens Christ's work to imagine that it is anything less than would pay for all men's sins. In passing, I must quote an interesting few words in I Timothy 4:10: *... because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe.* I don't think that “specially” connotes any kind of universalism (I would be just FINE with universalism, if only it were true, and included the cure of sin in the person), but rather that the words signify WHO is the Saviour of ALL men, and the “specially” signifies those who will accept His salvation. Further, we know that God desires all men to turn to Him for this atonement. (I Timothy 2:4, II Peter 3:9) We know this is God's DESIRED will, but we also know He does not compel it. We know that He identifies the “work” that men are to do as belief in Christ (John 6:29), and we are told that the condemnation is given in John 3:19 as essentially for choosing to reject God, not for some set of sins; rather, the sinner wishes not to be reproved. “Here is life; choose it.” After God has paid the fearful price for our sins, is it any surprise that He may reject those who won't accept it for pride's sake? (Or for any other sake?) And what would avail in its place? Do we really need a limited atonement to explain this, well, conversation, as it were? **0 points.**
- Now, irresistible grace – what does that mean? It is indeed irresistible that God exercises grace. Does that imply also that the acceptance of what is graciously offered is also irresistible, compulsory? Have we seen some people (as it is said) being dragged kicking and screaming into heaven? Surely some pastors would say they have. And have we not also known people who want, or really choose, something which they can't quite bring themselves to admit? Yet God knows the heart. He is sovereign and can deal with each man as may be. Can God compel belief? If He logically can, yet we must know this to be consonant with our free will. But we have also seen some men who clearly resist God's grace and refuse salvation – sometimes with apparent clarity about the choice. This also is another doctrine that is not required to describe (so much as it's our business) what the choices are for a man, nor how they fit into God's determined will. **Depending on what's meant, 1 point or 0: 1/2 point?**

- Do we believe saints persevere? That is, do we believe in eternal security? Well, if we do not, the consequence is something like saying either that Christ can't keep His, or that our security is at least partially conditioned upon our works. It is of course unscriptural, and foolish, to accept the first premise – and if we accept the second, we are (also unscripturally) stuck with the incredible unreliability of me to keep myself. That is for me immediately an untenable risk – in fact I should see any risk as untenable, once saved. Scripture, blessedly, teaches that Christ CAN and DOES keep His, and not on account of their works. **1 point.**

You see that, by common reckoning, I fall somewhere between 2 and 4 points on the “Calvinism scale”. And, really, who cares? I share my thoughts that we might have clarity, and argue only to understand better.

I have a copy of Calvin's *Institutes*. I can't claim to have read the whole, nor, had I, to be sure of understanding the whole. But I am in doubt whether Calvin would consider himself a “Calvinist” as some express it.

Here is the main thrust of my thoughts on the subject: Jesus Christ died upon a cross to pay for your sins and mine. He is God. It makes no sense to believe He accomplished this less than perfectly. It is against His glory to say so. It is also against His glory to imagine He could lose those in His keeping once in fact they are there. And if I am offered eternal life, how eternal is it if I may lose it? We now have guarantees about our electronics and our tires that, yes, are written down and handed to us, but also kept as an electronic record by the merchant; we CAN'T lose them. Would God do less? Moreover, are we not told, and clearly, that salvation is not of our works?

1. We are all sinners in need of a Saviour. We cannot save ourselves.
2. God, by being God, knows, and has in His hand, our destiny before we even come into existence, yet we have a free-will choice to believe in Him, or not. Even those who haven't heard the Gospel are accounted for in His plans, and He is not without means to reach them, whether or not the rest of us know about it. We are to trust Him about such matters.
3. His payment for our sins is sufficient for ALL men's sins.
4. Can God compel salvific belief? The truth is, for some of us at least, merely hearing the truth so as to understand it is sufficient to “compel” belief within us. For the most logical of us, facts imply other facts, and this is inescapable even when we don't like what is implied. Some, I think, are “compelled” by the evidence of God's presence, rather like Thomas – and, indeed, Saul on the Damascus road. Others, and we see this all the time, will believe only what they are willing to believe, though it be even clearly and demonstrably false. Again, like Saul, some change belief against their will, or at least their prior will. The interaction between God's grace administered through His Holy Spirit and our free will is a mystery specific to each man. When you know you believe, you can testify of it, but perhaps not altogether the “how” of it.
5. Saints persist, but is it of themselves, or of God? This is a self-answering question. If you can't save yourself to begin with, you can hardly keep yourself. It is of God.

What I think we should do with these “5-point” questions is to regard that some of the operation is necessarily the God-business of God. We know that some truths God teaches may sound contradictory to us, but we may trust that they are not. God can, for instance, allow you free will and still have perfect foreknowledge of your choices. He can also know your heart, and (if we may imagine it) even if He did NOT have foreknowledge *per se* of your choices, could still with perfect accuracy predict them. And we ought not lose sight of the fact that what God chooses to allow or compel in each of our lives, He chooses always consistent with His character – which we may rest in knowing is unfailingly good.

I now ask: why do YOU care?

- If you are trying to “win” the “Calvinist” v. “Arminian” argument, I submit that you are wasting your time. The “Calvinist” says the Bible teaches election. It does. The “Arminian” says the Bible teaches free will. It does. What prize do you get if you “win”?
- But perhaps you are concerned about your salvation, and how the Bible says that is handled. Well, for God's part, there is not only election, but the sacrifice of Christ. That's His part. For your part, it is, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved,” and that you can rely on Christ to keep those who believe on Him. Do you see? Believing into Christ is trusting in a Person. Whether we think about it or not, your belief in Him also necessarily, implicitly, establishes a relationship between the person of you and the Person of Him. It is called the new birth because it is like birth: you are born, and you, without even considering the matter, come into a

relationship with your father and with your mother.

- Or perhaps you have been saved a while and are developing your own internal theology, so you can give a ready answer of the hope you have in you – and have discovered that some things are hard to put into your own words, or your own thoughts. My intent here is to share my thoughts, so you can be like the “more noble” Bereans, who searched the Scriptures daily to see whether Paul’s doctrine was true. So: did I say true? According to the Bible?

In my opinion, we are most likely to encounter sharp controversy in discussing these issues if we are, so to speak, trying to form a dry catechism of “right answers”, to lay down a theology we can reduce to a mere textbook (playbook?). I don’t say by any means that we should abandon doctrine, or sacrifice even a jot or tittle of Scripture. And so much as they are faithful, we should have textbooks. Rather, a sound theology rests upon the whole counsel of God, the Scripture that is at once specific, concrete, and detailed, yet also quick and alive, sharper than a two-edged sword, strong to empower the believer, and to pull down kingdoms and cast down imaginations. A sound theology gives primacy to the glory of God and the authority of His Word, accounting it normative for doctrine and practice and for the redemption of men. The 5 points are, yes, worthy of discussion and understanding, but even were they all true, they would by themselves make a thin and weak theology, hardly worthy of God.

I finally wish to note that systematic theologies, whosoever they be, are abstractions, somewhat like maps in concept. They are primarily for the organization of knowledge and of our thoughts in study. The Bible is a very pithy Book – very much is contained very compactly, and the presentation is somewhat “here a little, there a little”; it invites and requires study for understanding to increase. A sound theology is, somewhat, how we organize our thoughts (and those of others) of our study of Scripture, and helps us to navigate amongst points of doctrine, comparing Scripture with Scripture. It is subject to the Bible, not by any means the reverse. Where a conflict appears between the clear teaching of Scripture and our theology, our theology must be reformed (not “Reformed”) in that particular to agree with Scripture.

I close with a story I heard from Pastor Bob Gray of Westchester Bible Church in the early 70s. The details, I suppose, date from perhaps a couple of decades earlier; I don’t know. It seems that a black preacher was asked about the doctrine of election, and, as one might imagine of that earlier time, he had not the full advantages of the most sound and erudite seminary training. He answered approximately thus, that he had not the education of some, but that he knew this: God votes FOR you, the Devil votes AGAINST you, and you have the deciding vote. Someone show me how, by any means, that that explanation conflicts with what the Bible tells each of us about his or her own case in respect of salvation.