

THE SEVEN POINTS OF SOVEREIGN GRACE

OR

THE SEVEN BRANCHES OF JUNIPER

An acrostic, biblical representation of essential Christian truth

THOSE Christians who hold to biblical Calvinism, Reformed teaching, or the doctrines of grace, are also known for their commitment to the five points of Calvinism, an acrostic representation of their essential beliefs. The formulation is as follows:

- T = Total Depravity
- U = Unconditional Election
- L = Limited Atonement
- I = Irresistible Grace
- P = Perseverance of the Saints

The origination of this summary of Calvinistic Reformation truth goes back to the early seventeenth century when Arminian Remonstrants, led by Jacob Arminius, proposed in 1610 “five articles of remonstrance [protest]” against the doctrine of the Dutch Reformed churches. The polarizing result was consolidated when in 1618 19 the Dutch Reformed Synod of Dort responded with “five points” summarized as above. The “tulip” acrostic has subsequently been understood as an excellent representation of Reformed doctrine emanating from the Netherlands, or Holland, where tulips abound.

While this Reformed emphasis has obviously originated with regard to a select group of points that does not represent all of the essentials of Christian truth, yet over subsequent centuries Christians in Calvinistic circles have often made confession and commitment with regard to the illustrious “five points” or “tulip” as a test of orthodoxy. However while this writer is committed to the fundamental truth that “tulip” represents, he has become increasingly aware of its limitations, especially when it is so often considered to be a benchmark with regard to acceptance into Christian fellowship. With this in mind it is suggested that “tulip” has some deficiencies that ought to be addressed, and especially when those of Reformed or sovereign grace convictions frequently confess to be committed to the principle of “semper reformandum,” that is “always reforming.” Though having said this, experience teaches that historic commitments to historic doctrinal tradition die hard, even when such a lineage is found to have certain shortcomings.

THE SEVEN POINT OF SOVEREIGN GRACE

The “tulip” formula lacks in that some of its points call for qualification so as to avoid misunderstanding. Hence “total depravity” is said to mean “thorough/radical depravity” or “total inability.” Also “limited atonement” is said to mean “definite/particular/effectual atonement.” Then “perseverance of the saints” is said to mean the “preservation of the saints,” and thus qualifies the less satisfactory belief in “once saved, always saved.” However a further deficiency of “tulip” is its lack in giving any explicit emphasis to the Christian gospel or progressive sanctification. For instance, in Loraine Boettner’s excellent volume *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, nevertheless at the commencement of the chapter titled “The Five Points of Calvinism”, he writes:

They are so many links in the great chain of causes, and not one of them can be taken away without marring and subverting the whole Gospel plan of salvation through Christ.¹

However the gospel plan of salvation is not clearly revealed in The Five Points of Calvinism. It will not do to respond that these gospel truths are implicit in the words “atonement” and “grace.” The are too foundational to be relegated to mere inference. The same concern is true with regard to Christian sanctification. It is quite inadequate for this truth to be merely cloaked within the term “perseverance.”

Consequently an alternative and more biblically inclusive acrostic is offered which, it is hoped, fills up the aforementioned deficiencies. After all, the tulip is not to be found mentioned in the biblical garden. Further, according to *Wikipedia*, the tulip actually has six petals. So we propose that the Juniper bush, being a biblical shrub, allows for a far better representation of essential Bible truth. There is no desire here for depreciation of the historic importance of *The Five Points of Calvinism*, only a concern for biblical clarification and enhancement. In I Kings 19:1 8 we are told that Elijah, in fleeing from Jezebel following his slaughter of the prophets of Baal, fled to the coverage of a Juniper tree. There an angel of God appeared and offered assistance so that Elijah was enabled to further retreat to Mount Horeb, that is Mount Sinai. The point is that for this prophet the environment of the Juniper tree offered physical rest, divine revelation, and recuperative sustenance. So we would suggest that the subsequent exposition of “juniper” similarly offers rest, revelation, and recuperation. The acrostic is as follows”

J = Justification by Faith
U = Unconditional Election
N = Natural Depravity
I = Invincible Faith
P = Progressive Sanctification
E = Effectual Atonement
R = Resistless Grace

¹ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 59.

It could be said that “Tulip” has a doctrinal progression which may be likened to the golden chain of Romans 8:28 30, to which Boettner alludes, whereas “Juniper” is not so logically connected. However Romans 8:28 30 assumes the preceding explicit gospel context of Romans 1 8, from which “Tulip” has become historically disconnected. Hence “Juniper” is a preferable acrostic representation of sovereign grace truth because it is more essentially comprehensive. We now consider each of *The Seven Branches of Juniper*.

Justification by Faith. Here is the very kernel of the Christian gospel which, being predicated upon the bad news of man’s natural depravity and active wickedness before a holy God, declares that a man or woman can be reconciled with that same God of Abraham through faith alone in the complete atoning merits of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As Abraham was justified through faith alone (Rom. 4:1 5), even before being circumcised (Rom. 4:9 12), so the Christian is similarly justified through faith alone (Rom. 3:22 24), has the same justifying faith as Abraham (Gal. 3:26 29), and that before water baptism. The essential predicament of the human race is fundamentally that of immorality since man stands condemned as unrighteous before the only righteous God. However, God is both a just and a justifying God “of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). More specifically, this faith looks objectively at what Christ has redemptively accomplished, so that through this faith, this look of the sinner directed outside of himself toward the crucified Christ, there is the obtaining of free pardon, accredited righteousness, and eternal life (Isa. 45:22; John 3:14 16; Rom. 5:17; Phil. 3:8 9).

Unconditional Election. God is under no obligation to save any guilty sinner since all of the human race, both Jew and Gentile, are in a state of condemnation through sin and guilt (Rom. 3:9; 5:16). The purpose of His salvation of any sinner, indeed the number that He does save “from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” (Rev. 7:9 10), is sourced in His elective grace (Rom. 3:24; 5:21; Eph. 3:8 9; Tit. 3:5 7). His particular choice was according to the good pleasure of His will (Eph. 1:4 6). Any faith choice of man is a consequence of this election rather than its establishment (John 15:16). Furthermore this election establishes the ground of God’s foreknowledge (I Pet. 1:1 2) or foreordination (I Pet. 1:20 KJV) rather than the contrary by means of supposed foreseen faith, in which case He would prove to be merely a good predictor. The purpose of this election is so that “we [Christians] would be holy and blameless before Him (Eph. 1:4). Hence, “those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, [should] put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, . . . just as the Lord forgave you” (Col. 3:12 13).

Natural Depravity. To say that man is “totally depraved” is to incorrectly suggest that all men are as evil as they can be. But this is not so since it is obvious that people tend to increase in the hardening of their souls as the years pass. Sin in a baby is nascent, in seed form, then in young people it tends to ripen with the approach of adulthood. To say that representative man is “thoroughly depraved” is to come much closer to the truth since he is

pervasively corrupt, that is in all the parts of his whole being (Rom. 3:13 18). Every aspect of a person is contaminated, not only physically, but also the intellect, will and emotions. However to say that mankind is “naturally depraved” is to go to the root of the matter, for it declares that his very nature, his soul, the core of his being is polluted; he is inherently corrupt (Rom. 5:12, 19). It is because of this root of sin in a person that the fruit of sins or active wickedness is born (Jas. 1:14 15). There will be variation in this sinning according to culture, yet it originates in the same Adamic root of inborn sin (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12, 19), this congenital malady effecting the totality of the human race without exception (Rom. 3:10 12, 22 23).

Invincible Faith. The true child of God will persevere in the faith even if there are periods of regression and failure concerning his Lord. He may, for a period, consider himself to be almost lost, and other Christians may hold the same opinion. But he is never altogether lost. Any backsliding will presuppose authentic front sliding. Such was the fluctuating faith of David (Ps. 41:1 13; 51:1 19) and Peter (Matt. 16:15 19, 21 23; 26:72 74; John 6:68). Nevertheless as the Lord Jesus said to the Galilean fisherman: “Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded permission to sift you as wheat; but I have prayed [to the Father] for you, that your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:31 32). In other words, notwithstanding Peter’s failures, it is Christ’s pleading with His Father that guarantees Peter’s faith will not ultimately fail, but rather unfailingly persevere. Such intercession is further evident in John 17 where the Lord Jesus prays for “the men You gave Me out of the world. . . . Holy Father, keep them in Your name. . . . Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” vs. 6, 11, 17). Certainly the Father will not deny the Son’s request. Rather Christ’s intercession will be effective, even at His Father’s throne (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:24 25; 9:24). However, Peter’s perseverance will be with suffering (John 21:18 19).

Progressive Sanctification. The securely saved sinner, having the status of full, definitive sanctification (I Cor. 1:2; 6:11; I Pet. 2:9), is yet to progress in gradual conformity, through the Holy Spirit’s enabling, toward developing stages of Christ likeness, spiritual fruitfulness, and manifest sanctification (Hos. 6:3; I Cor. 3:1; II Pet. 3:18). The cause and effect relationship here means that genuine conversion by God results in His child being evidently “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29). However, spiritually speaking, this results in “little children” becoming “children,” who then become “young men,” and ultimately “fathers” (I John 2:12 13). It is local church fellowship that greatly aids in this development “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12 13). To this end, individual responsibility involves the mortification of sin (Rom. 8:13), bodily consecration, the exercise of Spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:15 16), the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:1 2) and employment of means of grace (Acts 2:42).

Effectual Atonement. It is beyond dispute that there is an element of limitation in the effectual working of Jesus Christ's atonement, according to Scripture, since not everyone will be saved. Hence the question arises as to why there is this limitation. It is either because of God or man. Ultimately, because "salvation is of the Lord" (Ps. 3:8; Jonah 2:9), we believe that the effect of Christ's atonement in saving sinners is due to the particular, effective application of His saving merits to those who believe. In other words, Jesus Christ's sacrifice was not merely a divine offer that solicited sinners to avail themselves of His pardoning merits according to their autonomous choice. If this were so, then heaven would ultimately be populated, more or less, according to human initiative. However Jesus plainly teaches that He has come to effectually die for those given to Him by His Father (John 17:2, 6, 9, 24), in which case He declared that of these, "not one of them perished" (John 17:12). Thus intrinsic to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ was God's design that it not merely make a proposal, but really "save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Hence God purposed really to save and not merely proposition sinners.

Resistless Grace. While there is a general gospel call proclaimed to mankind (Prov. 8:4; Matt. 11:28; 22:2 14; John 7:37), yet there is also a particular and effectual call directed toward God's elect (Rom. 8:28; I Cor. 1:23 24). God's ordering here, the golden chain of His salvation plans (Rom. 8:28 30; II Thess. 2:13; I Pet. 1:1 2), means that the call to embracing faith (Acts 16:31) is yet at the same time the eliciting of saving faith that proves to be given, authentic, enduring faith (Acts 16:14; Eph. 2:8 9; Phil. 1:29; II Thess. 2:13). Such faith is aroused by the power of the Holy Spirit through soul regeneration. So Paul testifies that God "set me apart from my mother's womb and called me through His grace" (Gal. 1:15). In spite of resolute opposition to Jesus Christ, this Savior, as with Jacob (Gen. 32:24 32), wrestled him to the ground until ultimately resistless grace won the day with Paul's submissive cry, "Who are you Lord?" (Acts 9:5). So the new Christian is made to be both legally right with God (Rom. 4:5; 5:1) and dynamically alive unto God (Rom. 5:11; 8:9 10). Abraham was also confronted with this unconquerable, electing grace (Gen.12:1 7) that resulted in indomitable faith (Rom. 4:18 22).

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