

TULIP

Finding Jesus in the five points of Calvinism

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Introduction: a way where there is no way

When rightly understood Calvinism thrills people. Why? It is because the Biblical truths Calvin's theology encapsulates give powerful hope to us all through Christ. Calvinism is not simply a theological system. It is really a portrait of the heart of Jesus. It is a way of legitimately describing the incalculable grace and glory of God in Christ.¹

In 1967, at the height of the struggle for Civil Rights, Dr. Martin Luther King was speaking at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. In his address, he declared: 'When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.' He was talking about the power of God. From that speech that striking phrase emerged of which the African American church has become very fond: 'God makes a way out of no way.'

We could say that this is precisely what Jesus did for us sinners. He made a way back to God for us for whom it was impossible. That is the theological thrust of the five points of Calvinism. They give an outline of how what is completely out of the question and absurdly unfeasible for lost men and women, comes triumphantly true. They explain how God himself has intervened, thoroughly and decisively in Christ, on behalf of defiled, guilty, weak, blind, spiritually dead humanity. The five points show the breath-taking truth of the sovereignty of God in salvation. God will save us, and nothing and no-one can stop him. And therein all of us – even the worst of us – have hope. He 'makes a way out of no way.'

The five points are remembered by the acronym TULIP – Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Persevering faith. They will be our chapter titles.

¹ 'Calvinism' was not invented by John Calvin (1509 – 1564). The term is simply shorthand for the Biblical Christianity which the great 16th century Reformer of Geneva was so instrumental in rediscovering.

1. Total depravity

God created humanity upright and good. But Adam, the head of our race, at Satan's suggestion, fell into sin. He rebelled against God and so do we all. How has the Fall left us? What is the condition of guilty humanity now?

Speaking of Jesus, John 1.4,5 shows us how things stand: 'In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.' Calvin comments that John 'intimates that the human soul is indeed irradiated with a beam of divine light, so that it is never left utterly devoid of some small flame, or rather spark, though not as much as to enable it to comprehend God. And why so? Because its acuteness is, in reference to the knowledge of God, mere blindness. When the Spirit describes men under the term *darkness*, he declares them void of all power of spiritual intelligence.'²

John 1.10-11 goes on to say of Christ: 'He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, yet his own did not receive him.' There was the Son of God in clear eyesight, yet who he was did not register in any way with us – there was not even a glimmer.

The human heart

But humanity is not simply blind. We are actually against God and all he stands for. Of Jesus, John's Gospel says: 'This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear his deeds will be exposed.'³ Notice how our hearts, our affections are described – we '*love* darkness' and we '*hate* the light.' Many other Bible verses confirm our condition.⁴

The Fall of Adam has affected us all, in every aspect of who we are – hence the doctrine of *total* depravity. Our bodies die, our minds are dark, our consciences are flawed, our desires are self-centred and corrupt. Like poison dissolved in a glass of water, no part of us is uncontaminated.

² Institutes of the Christian Religion, translated by Henry Beveridge, Volume I, page 238.

³ John 3.19, 20.

⁴ We have hearts of stone, Ezekiel 36.26; are under Satan's reign, Acts 26.18; are dead to God, Ephesians 2.1-5; are at enmity with God, Romans 8.7; guilty before him, Romans 3.23

Some people have the idea that salvation is like a medicine which Christ has made available for all mankind and it is up to each individual to decide to take the cure. But, if *total depravity* is what the Bible teaches, we can see that this won't do. It would be like leaving an acutely ill patient who is blind and has dementia to medicate himself. It would be completely irresponsible. He needs to be *given* the treatment.

Others think that God should give enough grace to enlighten the minds of sinners, so that they are then in a position to decide about Christ. But if the doctrine of *total depravity* is true we can surely see that more than that is needed for anyone to be saved. It is not simply that our minds are dark, but that our desires **are** corrupt. We would simply not choose God. Presented with the plainest evidence we still would not believe.⁵

We cannot help ourselves. Our Fall is utterly calamitous. If we are to be saved from our sins and come back into a right relationship with God, then God must intervene. He must make a way, where there is none. This is what the five points of Calvinism explain. We must be cleansed and remade. In the words which Jesus used in speaking to the Jewish theologian Nicodemus, 'No-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again (or 'born from above')...I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying "You must be born again"'.⁶

The love of God

Total depravity is bad news but it implies two wonderful things.

First, we see the love of Jesus. He knew he was coming to a world which would hate him. Indeed, we crucified him. But he loved us so much, that he moved towards the pain and embraced the cost of our salvation.

Second, the truth of total depravity means that we do not have to pretend to be better people than we really are. Jesus knows the very worst about us. He knows it better than we do ourselves. Nothing about us shocks God and he still loves us and has given his Son, Jesus for us.⁷

⁵ John 6.36; Luke 16.31

⁶ John 3.3-7

⁷ John 3.16

2. Unconditional election

Of the doctrine of election Calvin wrote: 'Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which nothing useful and necessary to be known has been omitted, so nothing is taught but what it is of importance to know. Everything, therefore, delivered in Scripture on the subject of predestination, we must beware of keeping from the faithful lest we seem either maliciously to deprive them of the blessing of God or to accuse and scoff at the Holy Spirit, as having divulged what ought on any account to be suppressed.'⁸

We have already seen that our fall is so disastrous that our rescue, of necessity, has to be all of God. Unconditional election tells us that as far as can possibly be traced back into eternity past our salvation began, not with us, but with God. This brings great confidence to believers. Jesus said to his disciples, 'You did not choose me, but I chose you.'⁹ Of course, the disciples did make a choice to follow Jesus, but behind that choice was Jesus' prior choice. And that goes for every Christian.

My sheep

This teaching of Jesus comes out in many ways in the Gospels, but it is especially clear as Jesus teaches about himself as the Good Shepherd. To those who questioned if he was really the Christ, Jesus said: 'The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice, I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life...'¹⁰ Here we have two groups of people: those who hear and will not believe and those who hear and do believe. The reason that the first group will not believe is that they are not Christ's sheep. The reason that the second group do believe is because they are Christ's sheep. Notice, believing was not the cause of them being Christ's sheep, but the result of them being Christ's sheep. If we ask what it is that makes this second group Christ's sheep, the next verse tell us. Jesus says, 'My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all.'¹¹ Jesus' sheep were given to him by his Father. There is an act of God, prior to our believing, which predisposes us to listen to and follow Jesus. This is election.

As we contemplate this awesome and hugely humbling fact, which might raise many questions for us, we must bear in mind three things.

⁸ Institutes, *ibid*, Volume II, page 205

⁹ John 15.16

¹⁰ John 10.25-28; see also John 8.39-43

¹¹ John 10.29; see also John 17.2, 6.

- God was not under obligation to save any of us. We are all sinners and deserve nothing from God. Yet in his love he has chosen to save some.
- Why didn't God choose to save everyone? We don't know the answer to this, but Paul seems to indicate it is to do with God showing both his mercy and his justice, Romans 9.22, 23.
- But though he does not save all, Scripture tells us that he has chosen an enormous number of people for salvation – so great that they are beyond our ability to count, Revelation 7.9.

Whoever will

Why God chooses us is not because of anything in us or anything we do or will do.¹² He does not choose us because we are in any way better than other people. He does not choose us because he foresees some 'good' in us. It is all about God's grace, not our deserving or merit. It is unconditional.

This is highlighted by the many characters with very checkered histories who experience God's saving grace through Jesus in the Gospels. We think of the woman who had been through five husbands and was now on her next man. We think of Zacchaeus the hated tax-collector, miser and collaborator with the occupying Roman army. Then there was the man who lived in the tombs infested by a legion of demons. Also there was the murderer who died on the cross next to Jesus. The list goes on.

The good news of Christ really is for 'whoever' will come to Christ. Interestingly, it is John's Gospel, which is so clear on the doctrine of election, that also contains more 'whoever's' than any other Gospel. We might wonder how that works. If God has chosen some how can there be an offer of salvation to all? It is because of two things. *First*, God's choice is not governed by anything in us; and *second*, at this point in time only God knows those he has chosen.

It works something like this. Imagine all mankind in a huge skyscraper with all the 'good' people at the top, the not-quite-so-good on the next level and so on all the way down to the 'bad' people in the basement. If God chose people to salvation on the basis of their own 'goodness' then at some point there would be a cut off line and all those below that line would have no hope. Or suppose you said: 'No. The Bible says people are saved by their faith not by their good deeds. So let's arrange people according to the strength of their faith.' Now all the

¹² 2 Timothy 1.9; Ephesians 2.8, 9

gullible young people would be at the top and all the old cynics would be at the bottom. But again there would be a horizontal line below which no one could be saved, and below that line there would be no hope for anybody. They are simply the wrong sort of people. Or we could arrange people by way of social class, or wealth – with the poor at the top perhaps. But again, if God's choice acted on these lines, there would be no hope for certain people.

But the glory of unconditional election is this. It tells us that God's choice is not based on any human categories. It is 'free grace.' And because that is the case there is hope for all of us.

Let's go back to our skyscraper illustration. The truth is that no matter how you arrange mankind in that great tower block, God's choice cuts across all categories. God's cut is always vertical not horizontal. It runs through every level. And therefore, no-one can say to themselves 'I'm too bad' or 'I've gone too far' or 'I'm just not the right type'. Or to put it another way, he chooses your type – so why not you? The doctrine of *unconditional* election means we can offer salvation to everyone – to 'whoever will.'

The first question a person must ask is not, 'Am I one of God's chosen ones?' They will never know by looking at themselves, their sins or the categories other people put them in. The first question is rather, 'Will I come as a sinner to Jesus and trust him?' If the answer is 'Yes' then, for certain, they are one of God's elect people.

The Light has come into the world and instead of hiding from it they come to it. That only happens by the work of God.¹³ Jesus said: 'All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.'¹⁴

¹³ John 3.21; John 1.12

¹⁴ John 6.35

3. Limited atonement

We will only value salvation if we understand the terrifying nature of what awaited us as sinners had not the Father sent his Son to save us.

It is a great thing to be forgiven. But further, it is a greater thing to know that our forgiveness was procured at the cost of Christ paying with his own blood as a substitute for us for our salvation.

Calvin puts it like this: ‘Were it not said in clear terms, that Divine wrath, and vengeance and eternal death, lay upon us, we should be less sensible of our wretchedness without the mercy of God, and less disposed to value the blessing of deliverance. For example, let a person be told, “Had God at the time you were a sinner hated you, and cast you off as you deserved, horrible destruction must have been your doom; but spontaneously and of free indulgence he retained you in his favour”...the person will indeed be affected... But again, let him be told, as Scripture teaches, that he was estranged from God by sin, an heir of wrath... excluded from all hope of salvation...that *then* Christ interposed, took the punishment upon himself...with his own blood expiated the sins which rendered them hateful to God...and by this tie secured the Divine benevolence toward them; will not these considerations move him the more deeply?’¹⁵

It is the teaching of the Bible that Jesus made not a potential atonement for all mankind, but an effective atonement limited to some – to all who believe. He paid the price for his chosen people. The Christian can say, ‘He died in my place, for me personally.’ Thereby we are saved and cannot be ‘unsaved’. The ransom price has been paid.

God’s glory

In John’s Gospel, the cross is frequently spoken of as the means by which God is glorified.¹⁶ The Son glorifies the Father by revealing God’s love in accomplishing the work that the Father gave him to do. He glorifies the Father by redeeming the people that the Father gave to him. As a result, all who believe come into the experience of the love of God for all eternity.

Jesus tells us: ‘For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall

¹⁵ Institutes, *ibid*, Volume I, page 435 (emphasis mine)

¹⁶ John 7.39; John 12.16, 23, 28; John 13.31-32; John 17.1,4-5

have eternal life.’ Jesus did not die savingly for those who are eventually lost. All those he atones for are saved.

Again the Lord Jesus declares: ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.’ He then goes on to say who his sheep are. ‘My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.’¹⁸ He lays down his life specifically for his people who are identified by following him.

In prayer to his Father on the night before the cross Jesus said: ‘Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by (finishing) the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.’¹⁹ That Jesus’ work refers to his coming death is confirmed as he speaks about ‘finishing’ the task his Father gave him to do, his great shout from the cross (using the same word) being ‘It is finished.’ The Son glorifies the Father by finishing the work his Father gave him, namely his dying and rising again, in order to secure eternal life for those the Father had given him.

Christ died specifically and effectually for his people.

For the world

If this is the central teaching concerning the atonement, how are we to understand those many texts which speak about Jesus dying for the world?

We immediately think of those glorious words of John the Baptist as he directs his followers to Jesus: ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.’²⁰

First, the use of the word ‘world’ glorifies God because in John’s Gospel that word has negative connotations. The world is the corpus of people in rebellion against God, who do not know God, who hate him and what he stands for. Yet we read that ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...’²¹ The love of

¹⁷ John 6.38-40

¹⁸ John 10.11, 27

¹⁹ John 17.1-5

²⁰ John 1.29

²¹ John 3.16

God for sinners is truly without rival. There is no greater love. What a wonderful God!

Second, the New Testament heralds a new era. During Old Testament times the saving love of God had been restricted almost totally to the Jewish nation. But with the coming of Christ a new age dawned in which God's love would reach out to all nations. The Messiah would be a light to the Gentiles as well as the glory of his people Israel.²²

It is particularly in this context that we are to understand references to Jesus as dying for the world.

Following the testimony of the woman Jesus met at the well, the Samaritans declare that Jesus is 'the Saviour of the world.'²³ They rejoice in the fact that there is salvation for *them*, so rejected by the Jews. As Jesus' popularity increased, the Pharisees comment: 'Look how the whole world has gone after him.' That is immediately followed by the arrival of some Greeks enquiring about Jesus.²⁴ There is salvation for all who believe, from the whole world.

Our guilt is atoned for. No matter where we are from, or what we have done, what Jesus accomplished on the cross saves all who believe.

²² Luke 2.32, Isaiah 49.6

²³ John 4.42

²⁴ John 12.19,20, see also John 10.16 referring to the Gentiles

4. Irresistible grace

‘The fact is that we do nothing but resist God.’ So says Calvin. He goes on: ‘We are so addicted to evil that we cannot even frame one good thought. How then can we come to share in the salvation which the gospel offers unless God draws us to it by his Holy Spirit?’²⁵

It is not that human beings are as wicked as possible. People are not demons. However, we are so self-centred, that, in our fallen state, we are by nature enslaved to being averse to God. We are anti God. We can no more choose God than a fish would choose land over water. God must work in us if we are to choose Christ and be saved.

Jesus’ miracles

It is here that the miracles of Jesus point to the gracious sovereignty of God to change us and so to save us. They are almighty acts and in them we can see different aspects of God’s irresistible power for the good of sinners.

For 8 years a cripple sat near the pool of Bethesda, in Jerusalem, hoping for a cure if he could be first in when the waters were stirred. ‘When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no-one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured.’²⁶ What the invalid could not do for himself, in his power and compassion, Jesus did for him.

Another man had been born blind. The way the story is told in John’s Gospel makes it clear that his congenital total lack of vision is analogous to our blindness to God.²⁷ But Jesus gave him what his natural condition robbed him of – his sight. Later this man put his trust in Christ as he recognized who Jesus is. ‘Then the man said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshipped him.’²⁸

These miracles show us that Jesus is able to give faith where there is none. What an encouragement that is to those who want to be saved but feel it is impossible for them to believe.

²⁵ Calvin, Sermons on 1 Timothy, Translated by Robert White, Banner of Truth, page 190

²⁶ John 5.6-8

²⁷ John 9.39-41

²⁸ John 9.35.38

Effectual calling

God's irresistible grace can be spoken of in terms of his 'effectual call.' Many people hear the invitation as the gospel is preached. But for some that call comes not just as the words of a preacher but as the call of God who called creation into being out of nothing. His call creates faith.

This way of looking at irresistible grace is especially portrayed for us in the miracle of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. He had been in the tomb for four days and his body had begun to corrupt. The call of Jesus was opposed by decomposition and by death itself. But the command of Jesus, 'Lazarus, come out!' proved irresistible.²⁹

The mid-twentieth century preacher, Arthur Stone, puts it like this: 'Would the many characters of Scripture, subjects of Divine Grace, deny this "effectual call"? I am sure they would not. Let us view the ranks of the fallen, the debauched, the blind, the lame, the devil-possessed, yes and even the dead. But say some of the opponents of such a doctrine, "We do not deny there is a call, but we believe it is dependent on the will of man." I would suppose that a stinking Lazarus weighed carefully the matter before deciding to come forth out of the tomb or not! On the contrary, I respect the majesty of my Sovereign Lord too much to entertain such a thought. Jesus said with a loud voice, "Lazarus come forth." And he that was dead came forth.'³⁰

Our humanity

God is sovereign in drawing us to Christ. His purposes cannot be thwarted. However, having said that, we must not think that the way that the Lord brings about his purposes in any way implies an impersonal determinism, as if he treated us as automatons. Having created us humans, the Lord never violates our humanity.

The Holy Spirit works on, in and through our normal faculties. He addresses our consciences, he enlightens our minds, he charms our affections. He does not simply 'zap' us in some indefinable way. He works miraculously but treats us with integrity.

²⁹ John 11.41

³⁰ Evangelical Calvinism, by Arthur Stone, privately published, page 34-35.

This is why the New Testament insists, for example, that the truth of the gospel is addressed to the minds of those who listen. To be converted is 'to come to a knowledge of the truth'.³¹

Our affections are brought to 'love the Lord'.³² Our consciences are convicted of our sin.³³ A new principle of life is implanted in us. But this happens as, through the Spirit's work, our consciences make our sin unbearable, as our minds see the truth as irrefutable, and our affections perceive the love of Christ as irresistible to us. Thus we come to the Lord in prayer and submit to him as Lord and Saviour. We repent and believe.

Preaching

It is because God addresses the mind and heart and conscience – the capacities which make us human – that preaching the gospel rightly includes a concern to convince and persuade our hearers to come to Christ. If the Holy Spirit is about the work of convicting the conscience, convincing the mind and captivating the affections, then the preacher needs to be working in tandem with those aims.³⁴

The preacher beckons and beguiles. He reasons and reminds. He pleads and persuades.

Here is C. H. Spurgeon on Revelation 3.20: 'With hands loaded with love he (Christ) stands outside the door of your heart. Is not this good reason for opening the door and letting the heavenly stranger in.'³⁵

Such preaching is not a denial of the sovereignty of God, but an expression of the loving overtures of God towards sinful human beings.

³¹ 1 Timothy 2.4; John 8.32

³² 1 Corinthians 16.22; John 14.15, 21, 23

³³ John 16.8f; Acts 2.37

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 3.9; 2 Corinthians 5.20

³⁵ Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Volume 14, page 200

5. Persevering faith

One of the greatest causes for peace and joy for a Calvinist is that he or she knows that the Biblical gospel offers eternal security to all who come to Christ. Believers will be preserved all the way to heaven.

The purpose of the Father

Believers are chosen to salvation. The Father gave his elect to Christ with the express design that Christ will raise them up on the last day and that none of them should be lost.³⁶ The Father's purposes cannot be thwarted.

The blood of the cross

John's Gospel repeatedly alludes to the cross of Christ against the background of the Passover.³⁷ Jesus died at the time when, according to one calendar tradition, the lambs were being slaughtered.³⁸ Jesus is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'³⁹ Our sin has been taken away. Therefore, we cannot be condemned and lost.

The intercession of the Son

Not only has Jesus taken away our sin, but he prays for us. In the upper room, he prayed that his disciples would be protected and sanctified.⁴⁰ And what he prayed for them, he prayed also for us.⁴¹ His upper room prayer is an insight into his continual intercession for us as he ever lives in heaven. The Father always grants his Son's requests.⁴² We will be kept on the path to heaven.

The indwelling of the Spirit

John's Gospel tells us that believers have been born again of the Spirit of God. John goes on in his first letter to explain that because the Holy Spirit is in them it means that believers can never finally turn away from Christ and be lost: 'No-one who is born of God will continue in sin, because God's seed remains in him.'⁴³ Again he spells it out: 'Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith.'⁴⁴ By the Spirit, we will keep following Jesus.

³⁶ John 6.39

³⁷ John 11.55; 12.1; 13.1; 18.28, 39

³⁸ John 19.14

³⁹ John 1.29

⁴⁰ John 17.11-13, 15-19

⁴¹ John 17.20

⁴² John 11.42

⁴³ 1 John 3.9

⁴⁴ 1 John 5.4

The nature of grace

John's Gospel tells us that though the Law came through Moses, grace and truth has come through Jesus. Grace is not Law. By grace believers become God's children not his temporary acquaintances: 'Yet to all who received him, to those who believed on his name, he gave the right to become children of God...born of God.'⁴⁵ Can we imagine God losing one of his children? What kind of parent would that make him? It's impossible.

The power of God

Jesus specifically teaches that his sheep cannot be lost. 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.'⁴⁶ Calvin comments on these verses: 'No man makes himself a sheep, but is formed by a heavenly grace. And why does the Lord declare that our salvation is always sure and certain, but because it is guarded by the invincible power of God.'⁴⁷ How good it is to have a Saviour like Jesus who will never let us go.

The truth of the promise

The resurrection of Jesus underlines the reality of the promise of life everlasting. When something is everlasting it means it cannot be terminated. He does not promise a possible everlasting life, dependent on us, but a certain everlasting life which is the free gift of God. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'⁴⁸

Notice from these seven considerations that the security of believers resides in the fact that God will enable them to persevere and continue in the faith until the end of their lives, despite all opposition.

Questions

Does this teaching open the door to 'easy-believe-ism' in which, simply because someone has made a profession of faith at sometime but no longer lives as a Christian, nevertheless is saved? The answer is a firm 'no.' God preserves us by keeping us in the faith – following Jesus.

⁴⁵ John 1.12-13

⁴⁶ John 10.27-29

⁴⁷ Institutes, *ibid*, Volume II, page 223

⁴⁸ John 3.16

What about people who appear to follow Jesus but then fall away, never to return to Christ? The answer here is that ultimately they were never really Christians in the first place. We read in John's Gospel of many who once followed Jesus, turning away from him when things got difficult.⁴⁹ But those who Christ had chosen felt that though things had become tough, they could not turn away from him.⁵⁰

What about backsliders? Though no believer can finally fall away, it is possible that a true child of God can temporarily fall away. They can 'fall into grievous sins, and, for a time, continue therein.'⁵¹ The mark of a true sheep, however, is that eventually they return to the Good Shepherd.

We have an example of just this as we read about the apostle Peter in the Gospels. He sinned greatly by three times denying his Saviour, pretending he never knew him. But deep down he still loved Christ. It was a very painful experience for Peter. He hated what he had done, and eventually came in repentance to a Saviour who did not turn him away.⁵² He persevered in faith. We cannot be separated from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.⁵³

⁴⁹ John 6.66; 1 John 2.19

⁵⁰ John 6.67-71

⁵¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, 17.3

⁵² John 21.15-17

⁵³ Romans 8.38, 39

Postscript: As God's chosen people

How should this teaching (summarized in TULIP) of the sovereignty of God in our salvation affect our lives? Sadly, Calvinism has often been used as a theological stick with which to beat those who don't agree with us. It can be misused to make us feel superior to other Christians who don't see it. We need to repent of such attitudes.

The right outworking of knowing that we are chosen by God is spelled out for us in these verses:

'Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.'⁵⁴

As God's chosen people, we should strive to make sure that our lives and our churches are adorned with the following seven Christ-like virtues.

Compassion

When we look at people who have wrecked their lives through bad choices they have made in life, how should Calvinism lead us to react? If we really believe these 'doctrines of grace' they should lead us to say to ourselves – 'that's me without Christ. That is where I could have so easily been without God's grace.' If we really believe in total depravity, we know that we are no different from them if we had been left to ourselves. That ought to make us more sympathetic and compassionate.

Kindness

Often kindness comes hand in hand with joy. It is the old grumps / young grumps who tend to be self-centred and unkind. But Calvinism should make for joy – especially that doctrine of unconditional election. Do you remember the story of Abraham and Sarah? They were old, sad and barren. But God promised them a child and that their descendants would become a great nation through whom all the world would be blessed. There was no way it could happen. Yet the child was born to the geriatrics! What was their reaction? It was laughter! They named

⁵⁴ Colossians 3.12-14

the boy 'Isaac' which means 'laughter.' God's gracious power seemed like a glorious joke. We can imagine them saying with smiles from ear to ear, 'What are we doing, at our age, having the happiness of breast feeding and the chore of changing nappies? It's gloriously ridiculous!' And God's unconditional love brings incalculable joy to us.

How did we become Christians? The Bible says 'No-one seeks God'⁵⁵ – so how come we did? It was all of God. And now here we sinners are on our way to heaven! It is wonderfully absurd! Out of the great riches God has given us – we can afford to be kind to others.

Humility

The doctrine of election will make us humble. A group of students were sitting on the floor with coffee, having a discussion at the home of their theological professor. The professor asked a girl who thought a bit too much of herself: 'Why is it you are a Christian and the girl who lives next to you in the halls of residence, is not?' The girl replied: 'I responded to the gospel and she didn't.' 'Okay,' said the professor, 'why did you respond and she didn't?' She responded: 'I suppose because I saw who Jesus is and my need of him and she didn't.' 'Very well,' said the professor, 'why was that?' Again she came back, 'I was prepared to admit my sin and she wasn't.' 'Why do you think that was?' asked the professor. The girl replied, 'I guess because I'm more humble than her.' Then it suddenly dawned on the girl what she had said – and she blushed in embarrassment. 'I've just said, I'm a Christian because I'm better than her haven't I? And that isn't true at all, is it?' 'No', said the professor. When we grasp that only God made the difference in our lives we see that we are in no position to think ourselves better than others. It makes us humble.

Gentleness

Calvinism leads us not to try to push people around. We can't change people. But God can. This saves us from being harsh, rude and cynical about other people. We don't have to bitterly say to ourselves, 'what's the use?' We believe in irresistible grace. God can make people different – so with hope we can pray for them. That other church member can change because God has chosen him or her to become like the Lord Jesus. We don't have to rant and rave at them. We can commit them to God and be gentle.

⁵⁵ Romans 3.11

Patience

As the truths of the five points of Calvinism take deeper root in us they will make us more patient with people – more dogged and committed in our caring for them. Very few of us turned to Christ the first time we heard the gospel. But God kept pursuing us until he finally overcame all the resistance of our hearts. Being the beneficiaries of such patient Divine love should make us patient towards others – those who are always late, those who are elderly and ask the same question over and over again, those who irritate us.

Forgiveness

Through the cross, God has forgiven all our sins – not just the small ones but the large ones, not just the accidental ones but the deliberate ones, not just the hidden ones but the ones that everybody knows about. He has forgiven not just the ones we have managed to conquer, but the ones with which we still struggle. Often the reason we won't forgive is because what that person did dented our pride. But pride is a sin. If God could deal with his righteous anger against our sins by the sacrifice of his sinless Son for us personally, shouldn't we sacrifice our sinful pride and forgive?

Love

We are to be clothed with love towards others. The great twentieth century theologian Edmund Clowney asks us to imagine a man and a woman looking into each other's eyes. He says to her, 'I love you.' She asks, 'Why do you love me?' Now the man has to be very careful how he answers that question. If he says something like, 'because you are clever / funny / and have a great figure', she might understandably think, 'Well what happens when I've lost my figure and I'm having a bad day?' 'No', says Clowney, 'the only right answer in that situation is the word God gave to Israel, "I love you because I love you"'. In other words it's unconditional. That's how God loves us according to Calvinism. It directs us to love others in the same way.

These seven virtues show us how the truths of the five points of Calvinism should be outworked in our lives.