

Assessing the 'TULIP' of Calvinism

By Malcolm B. Yarnell III, posted April 4, 2006 in

EDITORS' NOTE: SBC LIFE, journal of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee, published two articles on Calvinism in its April edition. In this article, Malcolm B. Yarnell III sets forth "The TULIP of Calvinism, In Light of History and the Baptist Faith and Message."

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—The following is a summary of the "TULIP" of classic Calvinism, set against the backdrop of its origins and compared to the Baptist Faith and Message, with the full recognition that Scripture is the final authority on all beliefs and doctrinal systems.

TULIP's Origins and Emphasis

After the death of John Calvin, Theodore Beza and other Calvinist theologians reformed their doctrine around predestination in the matter of salvation and developed their various "doctrines of grace." Their major emphasis on divine sovereignty led to theological assertions that caused division in the Reformed theological community. Jacob Arminius, a Dutch student of Beza, countered some Calvinist teaching. In 1610, the "Arminians" crafted five articles which affirmed the election of believers but disagreed with the Calvinists' interpretation of election. In 1618, the Calvinists of the Dutch Reformed Church convened the Synod of Dort in order to condemn the Arminians and their five points. Dort's "five heads" of doctrine were later rearranged under the acronym TULIP.

T = Total Depravity

Calvinists at Dort viewed man not simply as sinful, but argued that every aspect of man's being is affected by sin, including his will. Some of Calvin's later followers went so far as to say that God actually decreed humans to become sinners. On the basis of Scripture (Romans 3:23), Southern Baptists have consistently affirmed that all humans are sinners by nature and by choice, but have generally rejected extreme views of post-Dort Calvinists that man is incapable of moral action and that God is ultimately responsible for human sin.

The Baptist Faith and Message states, “By his free choice man sinned against God and brought sin into the human race ... Therefore, as soon as they are capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are under condemnation.”

U = Unconditional Election

Followers of Calvin argued that God decreed from eternity to elect some to salvation. Subsequent followers posited a more extreme view that in conjunction with God’s election in eternity past of some to salvation, He also condemned others to damnation, a teaching otherwise known as “double predestination.” Most Southern Baptists would counter that it is God’s revealed will that all people experience salvation, citing texts such as: The Lord ... is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance (emphasis added, 2 Peter 3:9) and God our Savior ... wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (emphasis added, 1 Timothy 2:4). In response, Calvinists argue their system is part of God’s “secret will,” not His “revealed will.” but the source of their knowledge of this “secret will” is unclear.

Further, Southern Baptists generally reject as unscriptural the teaching that God arbitrarily chooses individuals to be damned before they are born. The Baptist Faith and Message, in simple accord with Scripture, states: “Election is the gracious purpose of God” which “is consistent with the free agency of man.” Southern Baptists affirm diverse understandings of divine election (cf. Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 1:5-11), but most would likely reject the view of those Calvinists who narrowly define unconditional election as double predestination. E.Y. Mullins, Herschel Hobbs, and Adrian Rogers were the three pastor-theologians who served as chairmen of the committees which created or revised the Baptist Faith and Message in 1925, 1963, and 2000. All three of these founding Confessors held views contrary to classical Calvinism. Mullins objected to the errors of Calvinists, whose doctrines are based on a “false premise” about God’s character, leading them to proceed “by a rigid logic to their false conclusions.” Mullins concluded, “God elects men to respond freely.” Hobbs decried the “error that election relates to certain individuals, with some destined to salvation and others to damnation.” Rogers,

a well-known opponent of “wine and cheese” theology, wrote a pamphlet aptly titled, *Predestined for Hell? Absolutely Not!*

L = Limited Atonement

Arminians correctly concluded that Christ “died for all men.” They cited scriptures such as 1 John 2:2: He Himself (Jesus) is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world (emphasis added, cf. John 3:16). Some Calvinists have countered with the assertion that Christ died only for those who were chosen to salvation from eternity past. In this view, the atonement is limited to the elect.

The vast majority of Southern Baptists would disagree with those who claim that Christ’s death on the cross was only intended for “the elect.” Complying with the Scripture’s silence in this regard, Southern Baptists did not use the word elect in the related portion of the Baptist Faith and Message, which simply states: “in His substitutionary death on the cross He made provision for the redemption of men from sin.”

I = Irresistible Grace

Early Arminians affirmed that God begins, continues, and finishes our salvation. However, because Stephen said that unbelieving Jews “resist the Holy Spirit” (Acts 7:51), Arminians concluded that men could resist God’s grace. The Calvinists of Dort disagreed, saying that God’s grace is ultimately irresistible, that divine election works unfailingly, and that the depraved and fallen human will is not exercised in conversion. When the converted human will is later exercised, it is only because God “powerfully bends” it. Avoiding this concept of irresistible grace, the Baptist Faith and Message states that salvation is a “change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,” and adds: “Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace.”

P = Perseverance of the Saints

The Arminians equivocated with regard to the eternal security of believers. The Calvinists, however, concluded that God “preserves true believers” from apostasy. Based upon texts like John 10:28 — neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand — our Baptist confession states, “All true believers endure to

the end” and “will never fall away.” Consequently, this may be the only doctrine from the Synod of Dort which the overwhelming majority of Southern Baptists support.

The Dort Debate and Baptists

The Synod of Dort (also known as the Synod of Dordt or the Synod of Dordrecht) was an international Synod held in Dordrecht in 1618–1619, by the Dutch Reformed Church, to settle a divisive controversy initiated by the rise of Arminianism. The first meeting was on 13 November 1618 and the final meeting, the 180th, was on 29 May 1619. Voting representatives from eight foreign Reformed churches were also invited. Dort was a contemporary English term for the town of Dordrecht (and it remains the local colloquial pronunciation).

The Synod of Dort condemned the Arminians. Early followers of Calvin also condemned many Baptist beliefs and perversely argued for the covenantal baptism of infants. Although Jacob Arminius tried to revise Calvinism’s extreme predestinarian doctrines, he also rejected Baptist beliefs. It could be successfully argued that the Calvinist-Arminian debate is, at root, a Presbyterian argument, not a Baptist one. Yet early English Baptists were also divided over the debate, with General Baptists identifying more with Arminians and Particular Baptists with Calvinists. These two streams eventually merged and flowed into Southern Baptist life. Consequently, there is a fair amount of diversity on the “doctrines of grace” among Southern Baptists.

Final Admonition

Today, few Southern Baptists would accept all five points of Calvinism’s original TULIP. In fact, the original points of TULIP have been largely redefined, redesigned, and repackaged by some Baptists. It is not unusual to hear the label “modified Calvinist” embraced by some within our Southern Baptist family. These would largely ignore the historical foundations and outright reject some of the original meanings associated with the five points. What is disturbing, however, is the recent tendency to grade one another on how a person lines up with a particular presentation of TULIP and make agreement a test of fellowship. As Dr. Paige Patterson rightly observed, “There’s plenty of

room under the [Southern Baptist] umbrella for anyone who is anything from a one- to five-point Calvinist.”

Finally, the greatest tragedy is when adherence to TULIP leads to division in churches and prevents them from cooperation in, and urgency for, a passion toward fulfilling the Great Commission. The greatest safeguard is for Southern Baptists to remain close to the heart of Jesus whose mission was “to seek and save those who are lost” (Luke 19:10) and to draw our doctrines from inerrant Scripture — not from a man-made system. Southern Baptists are first, last, and always followers of Jesus Christ, not John Calvin.

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