

STATEMENT OF RESPONSE TO 5-POINT CALVINISM

This is a brief summary of my position regarding 5-point Calvinism. Because it is a brief summary, please note that I include no Bible texts in it. My titles for the 5 points, and my understanding of them, are based on a summary of the Synod of Dordrecht in Holland (in 1618), which was responding to the threat posed by James Arminius--and as discussed in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell and published by Baker Book House in 1984.

Point 1: Total Depravity of Man

In Augustine, this teaching is at least partly based on the doctrine of original sin. Although I have trouble with part of Augustine's understanding of original sin (the part about extreme, and therefore sinful, sexual desire at the moment of conception being responsible for passing original sin onto offspring), I **do** understand that the guilt of Adam's sin is imputed to everyone born into this world except Jesus. [I'm not comfortable with speaking of "inherited" guilt because, strictly speaking, guilt is not inherited; but the Biblical term of "imputed" sin, or guilt, certainly seems to be the meaning of Romans 5.] In other words, I believe the Bible teaches that we are sinners first, and that then we commit acts of sin. I am **not**, therefore, Arminian in my theology.

Furthermore, I would also agree that because of original sin, man's nature is totally depraved. This I understand to mean that (1) he is born incapable of doing anything meritorious because (2) his entire nature is polluted with sin (ie., he is born with a sinful nature, with its tendency toward evil). This means that man's will is born out of harmony with God's will and is captive to Satan. Without the grace of God, he is in complete spiritual darkness and in a state of utter lostness.

Point 2: Unconditional Divine Election

In Augustine and 5-point Calvinism, the answer to man's sin predicament is unconditional divine election. In Scripture, election by God is spoken of in two major ways: (1) God elects (ie., chooses) a person or group of people to fulfill a special mission for Him; and (2) God's elect are those who possess the grace of salvation. I certainly agree that, in both uses of the term, divine election is unconditional in the sense that God's elect never deserve their election. Indeed, their total depravity means that without God's work of grace--called prevenient grace by theologians--none of them would ever have responded positively to His call in the first place. It is relatively uncontroversial to

state that for the first sense of election (see above), God has to choose **someone** or **some** group to fulfill a specific mission; thus, His choice does not necessarily mean that everyone else is rejected in a salvation sense by God. Concerning the election for salvation, however, the issue is more complicated: (1) Does God arbitrarily determine upon whom He will bestow prevenient grace and election; or (2) Does God only choose those who, in His foreknowledge, He knew would respond to Him; or (3) Does God give sufficient prevenient grace to all people so they can make a free will choice to accept God's offer of salvation (and other divine help), which He offers to all people?

Augustine and 5-point Calvinism declare that God arbitrarily chooses certain people to receive His grace and election for salvation--and that no one can question God's basis for doing so since His ways are beyond our human ability to comprehend and He is God anyway. The result is that salvation is entirely by grace, and no one can add anything else to it. I certainly applaud the desire to see and portray salvation as entirely by grace because I have no doubt that the Bible teaches that fact. However, in the effort to place all the emphasis on God's sovereignty and grace, this theology goes too far--and unnecessarily so. Virtually everything in Scripture about salvation and God's relation to mankind speaks about (1) God's desire to save all people and His unwillingness (ie., does not desire, even though it will happen) that any should be lost eternally; and (2) how people can be saved if they will turn from their wicked ways and turn toward God. None of these Biblical statements would have any real meaning if God did not desire to save all people, but He chose only certain ones to give the grace of responding to Him; in fact, it would make God out to be a liar! This is the greatest reason I cannot accept this teaching. It's one thing to declare that no one can question God; I understand that. But it's quite another to say, in effect, that God's Word doesn't really mean what it says about God's desire for all people, and His pleas to turn to Him actually constitute God asking many people to do what it is impossible for them to do (and since God knows all things, He'd have to know that His Word was flat misleading about His own character). That's the heart of my problem with it: it gives God a character which is completely contrary to what His Word says it is! God's character must be consistent with His Word, or else we cannot trust **anything** the Bible says!

My interpretation of Scripture is based on this premise that His Word must be consistent with His character as revealed in that Word. Therefore, while aware of certain texts which superficially seem to teach an arbitrary act of God as far as who He elects for salvation, my conscience compels me to look for a Biblical principle which reconciles **all** the evidence. And it is my present understanding that the key to the resolution of this problem is found in the Biblical statements that Jesus Christ is **the** Elect, and that all the promises of Scripture meet their ultimate fulfillment in Him! With this Biblical principle, the following conclusions seem most satisfactorily warranted: (1) God desires that all people be saved; (2) His Holy Spirit pleads with all people, and bestows sufficient prevenient grace for each person to be capable of exercising just enough will to ask for Divine help and more grace to seek Christ and do His will; (3) each person must exercise the small gift of grace they receive toward Christ (realizing, of course, that God Himself

has taken the first step, and necessarily so); and (4) that since Jesus Christ is **the** ultimate Elect Himself, all who choose to accept Him as Savior and Lord are also part of the elect of God.

Thus, it is appropriate to state that God has eternally predestined those who ally themselves with Jesus Christ to be saved, justified, sanctified, and glorified. Therefore, the doctrine of predestination is a Biblical and Christ-centered doctrine--**not** based on God's power and authority to be as arbitrary as He desires, but based on the fact that He has already told us in His Word what His will is concerning mankind and salvation--that He has predestined Jesus Christ to be His ultimate Elect, and that all who feebly accept His outstretched hand to save them will find themselves part of that predestined Elect (ie., Jesus).

Point 3: Christ's Atonement Limited to the Elect

The conclusion I draw regarding Point 2 (see above) leads me to reject this Point 3 also. There are too many statements in the New Testament especially that Jesus Christ bore the sins of the whole world at Calvary and that He died a substitutionary death for all people. Of course, the Bible does not teach cheap grace or universalism; not all will be saved. Only those who respond favorably to that small measure of divine prevenient grace will have the death of Christ applied to them personally. In part, that is the message of the sanctuary motif in Scripture--the Lamb of God must die, but then His blood (ie., righteousness of Christ) must be applied by His mediation on behalf of all who come to the Father through Jesus the Son. This is Christ's most important work as our High Priest. Thus, Christ's atonement provided the basis for **all** mankind's salvation; but only those who respond to Him will have the merits of His atonement applied to them **individually**, and thereby be saved.

Point 4: Divine Grace is Irresistible

If Divine grace were irresistible, then one of two things must be true: (1) God's Word accurately portrays God's will that all people be saved, and thus He offers His grace to all people, who will be saved in the end (ie., universalism); or (2) God's Word falsely portrays God's will about who he wants to save, and He offers His grace only to those whom He has arbitrarily and mysteriously chosen to be saved.

Under Point 2 I already discussed my view that God's Word must accurately portray God's will concerning who He wants to save (namely, all people); otherwise, the Bible cannot be trusted on any subject--for surely the character and consistency of God is most basic of all! The Bible clearly does not teach universalism, that all people will be saved. From these two principles, then, logic compels me to reject the view that God's grace is irresistible. It may indeed be a mystery why anyone would reject His grace, but sin is

indeed called the "mystery of iniquity."

Point 5: The Elect are given the Gift of Perseverance

It is my understanding that all things of God which people possess are gifts given to them by God. This includes grace, faith, salvation, justification, sanctification, glorification, etc.--all things! Therefore, the ability of His people to persevere must also be a gift from God. But God's grace restores man's free will ability to cooperate with Him or not, as he chooses. I certainly do not believe that any cooperation that man exercises with God means that he deserves or somehow partially earns any blessing from God; furthermore, the ability to cooperate with God is itself a gift from God. And although Scripture teaches that no one else can take Christ's people out of His hand, an individual Christian may do so freely by choosing to abandon Christ. After all, a gift can always be returned to the giver; a loving gift-giver would not force you to accept it in the first place or force you to keep it afterwards, if you didn't want it. So, like God's grace, His gift of perseverance is not, by definition, irresistible either.

This Point 5 is, in actuality, the teaching of "once saved, always saved." This means that since the elect will always be the elect, they will ultimately choose to persevere and respond to Christ in obedience to His will. But the practical effect of this doctrine among many is, not to persevere because you believe you are of the elect, but to live however you please--oh, not necessarily to become a bad moral person, but perhaps to live a good moral life, but not be so concerned about studying God's will from His Word (or to be certain you have the correct interpretation of that Word, or to worry about Satanic deceptions); after all, you are automatically saved! If Christians who believed this doctrine were **fully** confident in its "truthfulness," and **consistent** in that belief, many would abandon the whole idea of church and fellowship, as well as Bible study, because all these things would not be necessary; the church might be attended, but primarily as a social club--which is what most Protestant churches today have become anyway--social club or a political organization!

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