

Calvinism: Tiptoe through the TULIP

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Can Calvinist and non-Calvinist Baptists work together?

It depends, some advocates of Reformed theology say, on whether Christians on both sides are willing to tiptoe through the TULIP—the acrostic for five doctrinal points that set apart Calvinists.

TULIP stands for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints. Those five doctrines, delineated by the Synod of Dort in the 17th century, summarize distinctive elements of the theological system taught by John Calvin—particularly as distinguished from the teachings of James Jacobus Arminius.

**Baptists
find it
increasingly
difficult to**

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Proponents of what often is called “five-point Calvinism” emphasize the sovereignty of God and the doctrine of predestination—the teaching that God ordains specific human beings to be saved on the basis of his good pleasure, not on the basis of his advance knowledge of their repentance and belief.

Historically, some prominent Baptists identified themselves as Calvinists, including 19th century British pulpiteer Charles Haddon Spurgeon and James P. Boyce, founding president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. On the other hand, the first Baptists in England—John Smyth and Thomas Helwys—rejected Calvinism.

Calvin’s cool on campus

Calvinism is gaining in popularity in some Baptist circles today. A study by the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board and LifeWay Christian Resources showed about 30 percent of recent Southern Baptist seminary graduates identify themselves as Calvinists, compared to 10 percent of Southern Baptist pastors in general.

Renewed interest in Reformed theology—what Calvinists refer to as “the doctrines of grace”—also is evident among university students, some Baptist college professors have noted. In part, observers attribute the growth of Calvinism on college campuses to the popular Passion conferences, featuring Louie Giglio and Reformed pastor-theologian John Piper.

The Passion movement and related One Day events serve as gateways into Calvinism, said Roger Olson, professor of theology at Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary.

“My experience is that many young Christians swept up by this wave know little about the details of this kind of Calvinism,” Olson said. “Many of them are simply shocked to find out that it entails belief in limited atonement. However, after awhile, many of them gradually accept it lock, stock and barrel because they don’t know any alternative. Southern Baptists—and offshoots—have not been very good at offering young people sound theology.”



Hunger for theology that is “rigorously biblical and satisfies the desire to hear from God in his word” accounts for much of Calvinism’s popularity among students, said Thomas Ascol, executive director of Founders Ministries, an organization that promotes Reformed theology in Southern

Baptist life.

“The rising generation is looking for authenticity,” Ascol said. Students read biblical stories about faithful people who suffered martyrdom, and they hunger for “the radicalness of biblical Christianity,” he noted.

“Then they look at the slick and oftentimes superficial Christianity that dominates American evangelicalism, and they wonder why there is a difference. What did those early believers see we don’t see? Part of the answer is they saw the majestic supremacy of God over every sphere of life.”

Dancing to Piper’s tune?

Ascol believes Piper “has been used of God to help cast a vision of radically biblical Christianity to a younger generation of believers.”

“There is no fluff in Piper’s ministry. It is rock-solid Bible teaching that does not shy away from the hard sayings and clear calls of discipleship,” he said. “It is authentic in its devotion to the text of Scripture. That resonates with many in the younger generation who are hungry for truth.”

Critics of resurgent Calvinism, on the other hand, see it as appealing to the desire for clear-cut, black-and-white answers.

“The present, new Calvinists claim to know way, way too much about the mind of God,” Olson claimed.

He draws a distinction between the gentle and nuanced Calvinism held by many Christians in Reformed churches and the aggressive new form of Calvinism.



John
Piper

“My experience is that this new wave of Reformed theology—inspired by John Piper who is inspired by Jonathan Edwards—appeals mostly to young men who want to avoid any hint of ambiguity in their theology,” he said.

Divided by doctrine

In part because its adherents hold to its teachings so tenaciously, Calvinism has divided some congregations—particularly when Calvinist pastors have asserted their beliefs in historically non-Calvinist churches. To some degree, division may be inevitable, some Calvinists have asserted.

“Any given doctrine will divide. The gospel itself is a doctrine that divides,” said Jonathan Leeman, director of communications for 9Marks, a ministry founded by Reformed Baptist pastor Mark Dever.

“There has been a renewed emphasis on the doctrines of grace, and that could lead to some level of divisiveness. That’s almost necessarily so, in the same way that an emphasis on inerrancy led to division within the Southern Baptist Convention.”

But other Calvinists believe they have been unjustly tarred with the brush of divisiveness.



“What I have discovered is that Calvinism is blamed far more often for dividing churches or associations than is actually the case,” Ascol said. “Closer investigation has often revealed that Calvinism is often the tail on

which the donkey is pinned. I know of more cases where the real issue behind a controversy is biblical Christianity—what is a Christian and how does a person become one—not Calvinism.”

Missions and evangelism

Ascol also believes Calvinists often have been unfairly stereotyped as anti-missionary.

“Look at who has been going as career missionaries over the last few years. A significant percentage would classify themselves as Reformed,” he said.

Olson acknowledged the current wave of Calvinism—which he calls “Piperism”—is characterized by fervent missionary spirit.

“However, I think those who follow it out to its logical conclusion may eventually decide that there is no point in evangelism or missions,” he said.

“If you are told that your evangelism and missionary work is nothing more than a ‘foreordained means to a foreordained end,’ and it cannot alter what God has already decided, you might conclude that there is no urgency.”



Leeman frames the impetus for sharing faith in terms familiar to most evangelicals, whether Calvinist or non-Calvinist—love and obedience.

“Being that Christ is my greatest love, I will want to share him with others,” he said, adding that Jesus commanded his followers to share the gospel. “The call to repentance and obedience is not optional.”

But concern about Calvinism’s impact on fulfilling Christ’s Great

Commission is a valid concern, even if it's not well founded, Leeman added.

"The primary cause of division over the issue (of Calvinism) is concern on the part of the non-Reformed crowd that it will hurt evangelism and missions, and those of us who are Reformed need to be entirely sympathetic to that concern," he said.

"At the same time, instead of debating issues with us, I would like to see the non-Reformed crowd give us the benefit of the doubt. Accept that a Reformed congregation means what it says when it affirms evangelism and missions."

Show some grace

Ironically, the debate over the doctrines of grace often has been characterized by a lack of grace by proponents on both sides, and much of the division caused by Calvinism could be avoided if Christians treated each other a bit more graciously, some Calvinists and non-Calvinists agreed.

"I love my Calvinist friends and students," Olson said. "I have no quarrel with them; it is only with their theology I have a quarrel. And I do not attempt to convert my Calvinist students to non-Calvinism. I only ask them to study all the options and make sure they are thinking biblically and logically."

Shared belief about Jesus Christ and biblical authority should be sufficient ground for Calvinists and non-Calvinists to share the same pews peacefully, Ascol said.

"Our church has Calvinists and non-Calvinists joyfully laboring together for the gospel, and I know of many other churches that do, too," he said.

"We do that by focusing on the gospel—who Jesus is, what he has done and

why that matters. We may not agree on every detail of how the gospel works—such as election, predestination, effectual calling and particular redemption—but we are all committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and his supremacy over all of life.”

Leeman acknowledged some Calvinists are so adamant about their position that they have failed to show “pastoral wisdom” in making distinctive Reformed doctrines a test of fellowship.

“A wiser course is to avoid the language of theology and use the language of the Bible instead,” he suggested. “It’s not so much about Calvinism. It’s not so much about the doctrines of grace. Just preach the Bible.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Baptist churches, in Texas, the BGCT, the nation and around the world.