Sovereign grace

Calvinism stresses the total depravity or total inability of humanity's ethical nature against a backdrop of the sovereign grace of God in salvation. It teaches that fallen people are morally and spiritually unable to follow God or escape their condemnation before him.[3] It is seen as the work of God (divine intervention) in which God changes their unwilling hearts from rebellion to willing obedience.

In this view, all people are entirely at the mercy of God, who would be just in condemning all people for their sins, but who has chosen to be merciful to some. Thus, one person is saved while another is condemned, not because of a foreseen willingness, faith, or any other virtue in the first person, but because God sovereignly chose to have mercy on him.[4] Although the person must believe the gospel and respond to be saved, this obedience of faith is God's gift, and thus God completely and sovereignly accomplishes the salvation of sinners. Views of predestination to damnation (the doctrine of reprobation) are less uniform than is the view of predestination to salvation (the doctrine of election) among self-described Calvinists (see Supralapsarianism and Infralapsarianism).

In practice, Calvinists teach sovereign grace primarily for the encouragement of the church because they believe the doctrine demonstrates the extent of God's love in saving those who could not and would not follow him, as well as quashing pride and self-reliance and emphasizing the Christian's total dependence on the grace of God. In the same way, sanctification in the Calvinist view requires a continual reliance on God to purge the Christian's depraved heart from the power of sin and to further the Christian's joy.[5]

Calvinist theology is sometimes identified with the five points of Calvinism, also called the doctrines of grace, which are a point-by-point response to the five points of the Arminian Remonstrance (see History of Calvinist-Arminian debate) and which serve as a summation of the judgments rendered by the Synod of Dort in 1619.[6] Calvin himself never used such a model and never combated Arminianism directly. In fact, Calvin died in 1564 and Jacob Arminias was born in 1560, and so the men were not contemporaries. The Articles of Remonstrance were authored by opponents of reformed doctrine and Biblical Monergism. They were rejected in 1619 at the Synod of Dort, more than 50 years after the death of Calvin.

The five points therefore function as a summary of the differences between Calvinism and Arminianism, but not as a complete summation of Calvin's writings or of the theology of the Reformed churches in general. In English, they are sometimes referred to by the acronym TULIP[7] (see below), though this puts them in a different order than the Canons of Dort.

The central assertion of these canons is that God is able to save every person upon whom he has mercy, and that his efforts are not frustrated by the unrighteousness or inability of humans.

"Total depravity": This doctrine, also called "total inability", asserts that as a consequence of the fall of man into sin, every person born into the world is enslaved to the service of sin. People are not by nature inclined to love God with their whole heart, mind, or strength, but rather all are inclined to serve their own interests over those of their neighbor and to reject the rule of God. Thus, all people by their own faculties are morally unable to choose to follow God and be saved because they are unwilling to do so out of the necessity of their own natures. (The term "total" in this context refers to sin affecting every part of a person, not that every person is as evil as possible.)[8] This doctrine is borrowed from Augustine who was a member of a Manichaean sect in his youth.

"Unconditional election": This doctrine asserts that God has chosen from eternity those whom he will bring to himself not based on foreseen virtue, merit, or faith in those people; rather, it is unconditionally grounded in God's mercy alone. God has chosen from eternity to extend mercy to those He has chosen and to withhold mercy from those not chosen. Those chosen receive salvation through Christ alone. Those not chosen receive the just wrath that is warranted for their sins against God[9]

"Limited atonement": Also called "particular redemption" or "definite atonement", this doctrine asserts that Jesus's substitutionary atonement was definite and certain in its design and accomplishment. This implies that only the sins of the elect were atoned for by Jesus's death. Calvinists do not believe, however, that the atonement is limited in its value or power, but rather that the atonement is limited in the sense that it is designed for some and not all. Hence, Calvinists hold that the atonement is sufficient for all and efficient for the elect.[10] The doctrine is driven by the Calvinistic concept of the sovereignty of God in salvation and their understanding of the nature of the atonement.

"Irresistible grace": This doctrine, also called "efficacious grace", asserts that the saving grace of God is effectually applied to those whom he has determined to save (that is, the elect) and, in God's timing, overcomes their resistance to obeying the call of the gospel, bringing them to a saving faith. This means that when God sovereignly purposes to save someone, that individual certainly will be saved. The doctrine holds that every influence of God's Holy Spirit cannot be resisted, but that the Holy Spirit, "graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ."[11]

"Perseverance of the saints": Perseverance (or preservation) of the saints (the word "saints" is used to refer to all who are set apart by God, and not of those who is exceptionally holy, canonized, or in heaven). The doctrine asserts that since God is sovereign and his will cannot be frustrated by humans or anything else, those whom God has called into communion with himself will continue in faith until the end. Those who apparently fall away either never had true faith to begin with or will return.[12]

[edit]Nature of the atonement

An additional point of disagreement with Arminianism implicit in the five points is the Calvinist understanding of the doctrine of Jesus's substitutionary atonement as a punishment for the sins of the elect, which was developed by St. Augustine and especially St. Anselm and Calvin himself. Calvinists argue that if Christ takes the punishment in the place of a particular sinner, that person must be saved since it would be unjust for him then to be condemned for the same sins.[13] The definitive and binding nature of this satisfaction model has strong implications for each of the five points, and it has led some Arminians to subscribe instead to the governmental theory of the atonement. Under that theory, no particular sins or sinners are in view, but all of humanity are included in those whose sins have been taken away. The atonement was not the penalty of the law, but a substitute for the penalty, which allows God to remit the penalty by his grace when any sinner repents and believes in Jesus as the Christ.[14]