

Examining Calvinism: A Biblical Analysis

An honest look at the five points of TULIP in light of Scripture

Introduction: Why This Discussion Matters

The doctrines summarized by the acronym TULIP represent one of the most influential theological systems in Protestant Christianity. Millions of sincere believers hold these views. This document is not an attack on those believers, but an invitation to examine these doctrines carefully against Scripture.

The five points of Calvinism are:

- Total Depravity (Total Inability)
- Unconditional Election
- Limited Atonement
- Irresistible Grace
- Perseverance of the Saints

Let's examine each point alongside relevant biblical passages and consider whether these doctrines align with what Scripture actually teaches.

T — Total Depravity: Can Humans Respond to God?

The Calvinist Position

Humans are so completely corrupted by sin that they are **utterly incapable** of choosing God, responding to the gospel, or exercising saving faith. God must first regenerate (make born again) a person *before* they can believe. Faith is the *result* of regeneration, not the cause.

Biblical Passages to Consider

Joshua 24:15 — "Choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served... or the gods of the Amorites... but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

Deuteronomy 30:19 — "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live."

Revelation 3:20 — "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him."

John 7:17 — "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God."

Question to Consider: If humans cannot choose God until after regeneration, why does Scripture repeatedly command people to choose, seek, and turn to God? Are these commands meaningless if the hearers lack the ability to obey?

An Alternative View: Prevenient Grace

Many Christians believe that while humans are fallen and sinful, God's **prevenient grace** (grace that "goes before") enables all people to respond to the gospel. This preserves both human sinfulness and genuine human responsibility.

John 1:9 — "That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."

Titus 2:11 — "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men."

U — Unconditional Election: Does God Want All to Be Saved?

The Calvinist Position

Before the foundation of the world, God unconditionally chose specific individuals for salvation and others for damnation. This choice was not based on foreseen faith, works, or any human action — it was purely God's sovereign decision.

Biblical Passages to Consider

1 Timothy 2:3-4 — "God our Saviour; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth."

2 Peter 3:9 — "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise... not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

Ezekiel 33:11 — "As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die?"

John 3:16 — "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Question to Consider: If God unconditionally chose only some for salvation, why does Scripture say He wants "all men to be saved" and is "not willing that any should perish"? Why does He plead with the wicked to turn and live?

Election Based on Foreknowledge

Romans 8:29 — "For whom he did *foreknow*, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son."

1 Peter 1:2 — "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father."

These passages suggest that predestination is connected to God's foreknowledge — He predestines based on what He foreknows about who will respond in faith.

L — Limited Atonement: For Whom Did Christ Die?

The Calvinist Position

Christ's death was intended only for the elect. Jesus did not die for all humanity — only for those God had unconditionally chosen. The atonement is "limited" in its scope.

Biblical Passages to Consider

1 John 2:2 — "And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

Hebrews 2:9 — "But we see Jesus... that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man."

2 Corinthians 5:15 — "And that he died for all."

1 Timothy 4:10 — "The living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe."

2 Peter 2:1 — "But there were false prophets also among the people... even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."

Question to Consider: When Scripture says Christ died for "the whole world," "every man," and "all," does it mean something other than what it appears to say? Note that 2 Peter 2:1 says Christ "bought" people who are heading for destruction — how can this be if He only died for the elect?

I — Irresistible Grace: Can God's Grace Be Refused?

The Calvinist Position

When God chooses to save someone, His grace cannot be resisted. The elect will inevitably come to faith — they have no choice in the matter. God's effectual call always accomplishes its purpose.

Biblical Passages to Consider

Acts 7:51 — "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye."

Matthew 23:37 — "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!"

Luke 7:30 — "But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves."

Hebrews 3:15 — "Harden not your hearts."

Question to Consider: If grace is irresistible, why does Stephen accuse his hearers of "always resisting the Holy Ghost"? Why does Jesus lament that He wanted to gather Jerusalem but "ye would not"? Why command people not to harden their hearts if they cannot do otherwise?

P — Perseverance of the Saints: Can Believers Fall Away?

The Calvinist Position

Those who are truly elect cannot lose their salvation. They will persevere to the end. If someone appears to fall away, they were never truly saved in the first place. This is often called "Once Saved, Always Saved."

Biblical Passages to Consider

Hebrews 6:4-6 — "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God... if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance."

2 Peter 2:20-21 — "For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein... it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment."

1 Corinthians 9:27 — "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."

Galatians 5:4 — "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace."

Question to Consider: Hebrews 6 describes people who were "enlightened," "tasted the heavenly gift," and were "partakers of the Holy Ghost" — yet they can "fall away." If they were never saved, why use such strong language about their spiritual experiences? Why did Paul fear becoming a "castaway"?

Historical Context: What Did Early Christians Believe?

Scholarly Assessment: "There is no theologian in the Eastern or the Western Church before the outbreak of the Arian Controversy, who does not in some sense regard the Son as subordinate to the Father."

— R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*

While this quote addresses a different doctrine, the broader point is significant: **the five points of Calvinism were not formalized until the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619** — nearly 1,600 years after Christ.

Calvinist historian Loraine Boettner acknowledged: "It may occasion some surprise to discover that the doctrine of Predestination was not made a matter of special study until near the end of the fourth century."

Pre-Augustinian Views on Free Will

Before Augustine (late 4th century), early church fathers consistently affirmed human free will:

- **Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD):** Taught that humans have free will to choose good or evil
- **Irenaeus (c. 130-202 AD):** "Man is possessed of free will from the beginning"
- **Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD):** "Neither praise nor censure... are right if the soul has not the power of choice"

Question to Consider: If TULIP represents essential Christian doctrine, why wasn't it clearly taught by the apostles or the early church fathers for the first several centuries?

The "Compatibilist" Response

Some Calvinists argue they *do* believe in free will through a view called "compatibilism" — the idea that God's predetermination is "compatible" with human freedom.

How Compatibilism Works

Compatibilists say humans are "free" because they do what they *want* to do. Even though God has determined everything, humans act according to their desires, so their choices are "voluntary."

The Challenge

If God has "decreed whatsoever comes to pass" (Westminster Confession), this includes human desires and thoughts. So:

1. You are "free" because you act according to your desires
2. But God predetermined your desires
3. So your "freedom" is doing what God made you want to do

Even Calvinist sources acknowledge: "It should be noted that this position [compatibilism] is no less deterministic than hard determinism — be clear that neither soft nor hard determinism believes man has a free will."

— Monergism.com

Question to Consider: If compatibilism admits it doesn't believe in free will as commonly understood, is this what the Bible means when it commands people to "choose"?

Comparison: Two Views of God's Saving Work

Issue	Calvinist View	Alternative View
Human Ability	Cannot respond until regenerated	Enabled by prevenient grace to respond
God's Desire	Wills to save only the elect	Wills all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4)
Christ's Atonement	For the elect only	For the whole world (1 John 2:2)
Grace	Cannot be resisted	Can be resisted (Acts 7:51)
Perseverance	Cannot be lost	Can fall away (Heb 6:4-6)
Basis of Election	Unconditional decree	Foreknowledge of faith (1 Pet 1:2)

Key Scriptures Summary

On Human Choice:

- Joshua 24:15 — "Choose you this day"
- Deuteronomy 30:19 — "Choose life"
- Revelation 3:20 — "If any man... open the door"

On God's Universal Saving Will:

- 1 Timothy 2:4 — "All men to be saved"
- 2 Peter 3:9 — "Not willing that any should perish"
- John 3:16 — "Whosoever believeth"

On Universal Atonement:

- 1 John 2:2 — "The whole world"

- Hebrews 2:9 — "Every man"

- 2 Corinthians 5:15 — "He died for all"

On Resisting Grace:

- Acts 7:51 — "Ye do always resist"
- Matthew 23:37 — "Ye would not"
- Luke 7:30 — "Rejected the counsel of God"

On Falling Away:

- Hebrews 6:4-6 — "If they shall fall away"
- 2 Peter 2:20-21 — "Turn from the holy commandment"
- Galatians 5:4 — "Fallen from grace"

Questions for Further Study

1. If humans cannot choose God, why does the Bible command them to choose over 100 times?
2. If God wants only the elect saved, why does Scripture say He wants "all" to be saved?
3. If Christ died only for the elect, why does Scripture say He died for "the whole world"?
4. If grace is irresistible, why does Acts 7:51 say people "always resist the Holy Ghost"?
5. If believers cannot fall away, why does Hebrews warn those who "tasted the heavenly gift" about falling away?
6. If TULIP is essential doctrine, why wasn't it clearly taught until the 1600s?

Conclusion: An Invitation to Study

This document is not intended to attack sincere Calvinist believers, but to encourage honest engagement with Scripture. Every theological system should be tested against the Word of God.

The Berean Standard: "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so." — Acts 17:11

May we all be willing to examine our beliefs in light of Scripture, holding fast to what is true and being willing to adjust our understanding when the evidence warrants it.

Prepared for thoughtful discussion and biblical study

Sources: Scripture quotations from KJV | Historical references from R.P.C. Hanson, Loraine Boettner, early church fathers