Part One

THE FIVE POINTS DEFINED: THEIR ORIGIN AND CONTENTS

To understand how and why the system of theology known to history as Calvinism came to bear this name and to be formulated in five points, one must understand the theological conflict which occurred in Holland during the first quarter of the seventeenth century.

POINTS OF CONTENTION

The Protest of the Arminian Party

In 1610, just one year after the death of James Arminius (a Dutch seminary professor), his followers drew up *five articles of faith* based on his teachings. The Arminians, as his followers came to be called, presented these five doctrines to the State of Holland in the form of a "Remonstrance" (i.e., a protest). The Arminian party insisted that the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism (the official expression of the doctrinal position of the Church of Holland) be changed to conform to the doctrinal views contained in the

Remonstrance. The Arminians objected to the doctrines upheld in both the Confession and the Catechism relating to divine sovereignty, human inability, unconditional election or predestination, particular redemption, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. They wanted the official standards of the Church of Holland revised on these subjects.

The Five Points of Arminianism

Roger Nicole summarizes the five articles contained in the Remonstrance as follows:

> I. God elects or reproves on the basis of foreseen faith or unbelief. II. Christ died for all men and for every man, although only believers are saved. III. Man is so depraved that divine grace is necessary unto faith or any good deed. IV. This grace may be resisted. V. Whether all who are truly regenerate will certainly persevere in the faith is a point which needs further investigation.[1]

The last article was later altered so as definitely to teach that the truly regenerate believer could lose his faith and thus lose his salvation. However, Arminians have not been in agreement on this point. Some have held that all who are regenerated by the Spirit of God are eternally secure and can never perish.

The Philosophical Basis of Arminianism

J. I. Packer, in analyzing the system of thought embodied in the Remonstrance, observes:

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1. Roger Nicole, "Arminianism," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology,* ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 64.

The theology which it contained (known to history as Arminianism) stemmed from two philosophical principles: first, that divine sovereignty is not compatible with human freedom, nor therefore with human responsibility; second, that ability limits obligation. . . . From these principles, the Arminians drew two deductions: first, that since the Bible regards faith as a free and responsible act, it cannot be caused by God, but is exercised independently of Him; second, that since the Bible regards faith as obligatory on the part of all who hear the gospel, ability to believe must be universal. Hence, they maintained, Scripture must be interpreted as teaching the following positions: (1.) Man is never so completely corrupted by sin that he cannot savingly believe the gospel when it is put before him, nor (2.) is he ever so completely controlled by God that he cannot reject it. (3.) God's election of those who shall be saved is prompted by His foreseeing that they will of their own accord believe. (4.) Christ's death did not ensure the salvation of anyone, for it did not secure the gift of faith to anyone (there is no such gift); what it did was rather to create a possibility of salvation for everyone if they believe. (5.) It rests with believers to keep themselves in a state of grace by keeping up their faith; those who fail here fall away and are lost. Thus, Arminianism made man's salvation depend ultimately on man himself, saving faith being viewed throughout as man's own work and, because his own, not God's in him.[2]

A Five-Point Response to Arminianism

A national synod was called to meet in Dort in 1618 for the purpose of examining the views of Arminius in the light of

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2. James I. Packer, "Introductory Essay," in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ,* by John Owen (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 3–4.

Scripture. The Great Synod was convened by the States-General of Holland on November 13, 1618. Among the 84 Dutch delegates were 18 secular commissioners. Included were 27 delegates from various German states, Switzerland, England, and Scotland. There were 154 sessions held during the seven months that the Synod met to consider these matters, the last of which was on May 9, 1619.

Warburton writes:

> The Synod had given a very close examination to the "five points" which had been advanced by the Remonstrants, and had compared the teaching advanced in them with the testimony of Scripture. Failing to reconcile that teaching with the Word of God, which they had definitely declared could alone be accepted by them as the rule of faith, they had unanimously rejected them. They felt, however, that a mere rejection was not sufficient. It remained for them to set forth the true Calvinistic teaching in relationship to those matters which had been called into question. This they proceeded to do, embodying the Calvinistic position in five chapters which have ever since been known as "the five points of Calvinism."[3]

The name *Calvinism* derives from John Calvin (1509–1564), the great French Reformer who did so much to expound and defend these views.

No doubt it will seem strange to many in our day that the Synod of Dort rejected as heretical the five doctrines advanced by the Arminians, for these doctrines have gained wide acceptance in the modern church. In fact, they are seldom questioned

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3. Ben A. Warburton, *Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 61. Although there were five Calvinistic articles, there were only four chapters. This was because the third and fourth articles were combined into one chapter. Consequently, the third chapter is always designated as Chapter III–IV.

in our generation. But the vast majority of the Protestant theologians of that day took a much different view of the matter. They maintained that the Bible set forth a system of doctrine quite different from that advocated by the Arminian party. Salvation was viewed by the members of the Synod as *a work of grace from beginning to end;* they did not believe that the sinner saved himself or contributed to his salvation in any sense. Adam's fall had completely ruined the race. All men were by nature spiritually dead, and their wills were in bondage to sin and Satan. The ability to believe the gospel was itself a gift from God, bestowed only upon those whom He had chosen to be the objects of His unmerited favor. It was not man, but God, who determined which sinners would be shown mercy and saved. This, in essence, is what the members of the Synod of Dort understood the Bible to teach.

CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM COMPARED

In the chart which follows, the five points of Arminianism (rejected by the Synod) and the five points of Calvinism (set forth by the Synod) are given, side by side, so that it might be readily seen wherein and to what extent these two systems of doctrine differ.

THE FIVE POINTS OF ARMINIANISM	THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM
1. Free Will or Human Ability Although human nature was seriously affected by the Fall, man has not been left in a state of total spiritual helplessness. God graciously enables every sinner to repent and believe, but He does so in such a manner as not to interfere with man's freedom. Each sinner possesses a free will, and his eternal destiny depends on how he uses it.	**1. Total Inability or Total Depravity** Because of the Fall, man is unable of himself to savingly believe the gospel. The sinner is dead, blind, and deaf to the things of God; his heart is deceitful and desperately corrupt. His will is not free; it is in bondage to his evil nature. Therefore, he will not—indeed, he cannot—choose good over evil in the spiritual realm. Consequently, it

Man's freedom consists of his ability to choose good over evil in spiritual matters; his will is not enslaved to his sinful nature. The sinner has the power either to cooperate with God's Spirit and be regenerated or to resist God's grace and perish. The lost sinner needs the Spirit's assistance, but he does not have to be regenerated by the Spirit before he can believe, for faith is man's act and precedes the new birth. Faith is the sinner's gift to God; it is man's contribution to salvation.

takes much more than the Spirit's assistance to bring a sinner to Christ. It takes regeneration, by which the Spirit makes the sinner alive and gives him a new nature. Faith is not something man contributes to salvation, but is itself a part of God's gift of salvation. It is God's gift to the sinner, not the sinner's gift to God.

2. Conditional Election

God's choice of certain individuals for salvation before the foundation of the world was based upon His foreseeing that they would respond to His call. He selected only those whom He knew would of themselves freely believe the gospel. Election therefore was determined by, or conditioned upon, what man would do. The faith which God foresaw, and upon which He based His choice, was not given to the sinner by God (it was not created by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit), but resulted solely from man's will. It was left entirely up to man to determine who would believe and therefore who would be elected for salvation. God chose those whom He knew would, of their own free will, choose Christ. Thus, the sinner's choice of Christ, not God's choice of the sinner, is the ultimate cause of salvation.

2. Unconditional Election

God's choice of certain individuals for salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely in His own sovereign will. His choice of particular sinners was not based on any foreseen response or obedience on their part, such as faith, repentance, etc. On the contrary, God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected. These acts are the result, not the cause, of God's choice. Election, therefore, was not determined by, or conditioned upon, any virtuous quality or act foreseen in man. Those whom God sovereignly elected He brings through the power of the Spirit to a willing acceptance of Christ. Thus, God's choice of the sinner, not the sinner's choice of Christ, is the ultimate cause of salvation.

3. Universal Redemption or General Atonement

Christ's redeeming work made it possible for everyone to be saved,

3. Particular Redemption or Limited Atonement

Christ's redeeming work was intended to save the elect only and

but did not actually secure the salvation of anyone. Although Christ died for all men and for every man, only those who believe in Him are saved. His death enabled God to pardon sinners on the condition that they believe, but it did not actually put away anyone's sins. Christ's redemption becomes effective only if man chooses to accept it.

actually secured salvation for them. His death was a substitutionary endurance of the penalty of sin in the place of certain specified sinners. In addition to putting away the sins of His people, Christ's redemption secured everything necessary for their salvation, including faith, which unites them to Him. The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, thereby guaranteeing their salvation.

4. The Holy Spirit Can Be Effectually Resisted

The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are called outwardly by the gospel invitation; He does all that He can to bring every sinner to salvation. But inasmuch as man is free, he can successfully resist the Spirit's call. The Spirit cannot regenerate the sinner until he believes; faith (which is man's contribution) precedes and makes possible the new birth. Thus, man's free will limits the Spirit in the application of Christ's saving work. The Holy Spirit can only draw to Christ those who allow Him to have His way with them. Until the sinner responds, the Spirit cannot give life. God's grace, therefore, is not invincible; it can be, and often is, resisted and thwarted by man.

4. The Efficacious Call of the Spirit or Irresistible Grace

In addition to the outward general call to salvation, which is made to everyone who hears the gospel, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. The external call (which is made to all without distinction) can be, and often is, rejected. However, the internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion. By means of this special call, the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ. He is not limited in His work of applying salvation by man's will, nor is He dependent upon man's cooperation for success. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ. God's grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.

5. Falling from Grace

Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their faith, etc.

5. Perseverance of the Saints

All who are chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit, are eternally saved.

All Arminians have not been agreed on this point; some have held that believers are eternally secure in Christ—that once a sinner is regenerated, he can never be lost.

They are kept in faith by the power of almighty God, and thus persevere to the end.

According to Arminianism:
Salvation is accomplished through the combined efforts of God (who takes the initiative) and man (who must respond)—man's response being the determining factor. God has provided salvation for everyone, but His provision becomes effective only for those who, of their own free will, choose to cooperate with Him and accept His offer of grace. At the crucial point, man's will plays a decisive role; thus, *man,* not God, determines who will be the recipients of the gift of salvation.

According to Calvinism:
Salvation is accomplished by the almighty power of the triune God. The Father chose a people, the Son died for them, and the Holy Spirit makes Christ's death effective by bringing the elect to faith and repentance, thereby causing them to willingly obey the gospel. The entire process (election, redemption, regeneration) is the work of God and is by grace alone. Thus, *God,* not man, determines who will be the recipients of the gift of salvation.

REJECTED
by the Synod of Dort
This was the system of thought contained in the "Remonstrance" (though the "five points" were not originally arranged in this order). It was submitted by the Arminians to the Church of Holland in 1610 for adoption, but was rejected by the Synod of Dort in 1619 on the ground that it was unscriptural.

REAFFIRMED
by the Synod of Dort
This system of theology was reaffirmed by the Synod of Dort in 1619 as the doctrine of salvation contained in the Holy Scriptures. The system was at that time formulated in "five points" (in answer to the five points submitted by the Arminians) and has ever since been known as "the five points of Calvinism."

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF EACH SYSTEM

The basic concepts of each system are much older than the Synod of Dort. Neither John Calvin nor James Arminius originated the basic concepts which undergird the two systems that bear their names.

The Controversy Between Pelagius and Augustine

The fundamental principles of each system can be traced back many centuries prior to the time when Calvin and Arminius lived. For example, the basic doctrines of the Calvinistic position had been vigorously defended by Augustine against Pelagius in the fifth century. Cunningham writes:

> As there was nothing new in substance in the Calvinism of Calvin, so there was nothing new in the Arminianism of Arminius. . . . The doctrines of Arminius can be traced back as far as the time of Clemons Alexandrinus, and seem to have been held by many of the fathers of the third and fourth centuries, having been diffused in the church through the corrupting influence of pagan philosophy. Pelagius and his followers, in the fifth century, were as decidedly opposed to Calvinism as Arminius was, though they deviated much further from sound doctrine than he did.[4]

Pelagius denied that human nature had been corrupted by sin. He maintained that the only ill effect which the race had suffered as the result of Adam's transgression was the bad example which he had set for mankind. According to Pelagius, every infant comes into the world in the same condition as Adam was before the Fall. His leading principle was that *man's will is absolutely free.* Hence, everyone has the power, within himself, to believe the gospel, as well as to keep the law of God perfectly.

Augustine, on the other hand, maintained that human nature had been so completely corrupted by Adam's fall that no one, in himself, has the ability to obey either the law or the gospel. Divine grace is essential if sinners are to believe and be saved, and this grace is extended only to those whom God pre-

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4. William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1960), 2:374.

destined to eternal life before the foundation of the world. The act of faith, therefore, results, not from the sinner's free will (as Pelagius taught), but from God's free grace, which is bestowed on the elect only.

Semi-Pelagianism, the Forerunner of Arminianism

Smeaton, in showing how Semi-Pelagianism (the forerunner of Arminianism) originated, states:

> Augustine's unanswerable polemic had so fully discredited Pelagianism in the field of argument, that it could no longer be made plausible to the Christian mind. It collapsed. But a new system soon presented itself, teaching that *man with his own natural powers is able to take the first step towards his conversion,* and that this obtains or merits the Spirit's assistance. Cassian . . . was the founder of this middle way, which came to be called SEMI-PELAGIANISM, because it occupied intermediate ground between Pelagianism and Augustinianism, and took in elements from both. He acknowledged that Adam's sin extended to his posterity, and that human nature was corrupted by original sin. But, on the other hand, he held a system of universal grace for all men alike, making the final decision in the case of every individual dependent on the exercise of free-will.

Speaking of those who followed Cassian, Smeaton continues:

> They held that the first movement of the will in the assent of faith must be ascribed to the natural powers of the human mind. This was their primary error. Their maxim was: *"It is mine to be willing* to believe, and it is the part of God's grace to assist." They asserted the sufficiency of Christ's grace for all, and that every one

according to his own will obeyed or rejected the invitation, while God equally wished and equally aided all men to be saved. . . . The entire system thus formed is a half-way house containing elements of error and elements of truth, and not at all differing from the Arminianism which, after the resuscitation of the doctrines of grace by the Reformers, diffused itself in the very same way through the different Churches.[5]

Calvinism, the Theology of the Reformation

The leaders of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century rejected Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism on the ground that both systems were unscriptural. Like Augustine, the Reformers held to the doctrines of the sovereignty of God, the total depravity of man, and unconditional election. As Boettner shows, they stood together in their view of predestination:

> It was taught not only by Calvin, but by Luther, Zwingli, Melanchthon (although Melanchthon later retreated toward the Semi-Pelagian position), by Bullinger, Bucer, and all of the outstanding leaders in the Reformation. While differing on some other points they agreed on this doctrine of Predestination and taught it with emphasis. Luther's chief work, *The Bondage of the Will,* shows that he went into the doctrine as heartily as did Calvin himself.[6]

5. George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,* 2d ed. (1889; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1974), 338–39. Italics and capitalizations are his. Semi-Pelagianism was repudiated by the Synod of Orange in A.D. 529, just as Arminianism was repudiated by the Synod of Dort almost eleven hundred years later.

6. Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), 1.

Packer states:

> All the leading Protestant theologians of the first epoch of the Reformation, stood on precisely the same ground here. On other points, they had their differences; but in asserting the helplessness of man in sin, and the sovereignty of God in grace, they were entirely at one. To all of them, these doctrines were the very life-blood of the Christian faith. . . . To the Reformers, the crucial question was not simply, whether God justifies believers without works of law. It was the broader question, whether sinners are wholly helpless in their sin, and whether God is to be thought of as saving them by free, unconditional, invincible grace, not only justifying them for Christ's sake when they come to faith, but also raising them from the death of sin by His quickening Spirit in order to bring them to faith. Here was the crucial issue: whether God is the author, not merely of justification, but also of faith; whether, in the last analysis, Christianity is a religion of utter reliance on God for salvation and all things necessary to it, or of self-reliance and self-effort.[7]

Thus, it is evident that the five points of Calvinism, drawn up by the Synod of Dort in 1619, were by no means a new sys-

7. James I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, "Historical and Theological Introduction," in *The Bondage of the Will,* by Martin Luther (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1957), 58–59. In speaking of the English Reformation, Buis shows that "the advocates of that Reformation were definitely Calvinistic." To substantiate this, he quotes the following from Fisher: "The Anglican Church agreed with the Protestant Churches on the continent on the subject of predestination. On this subject, for a long period, the Protestants generally were united in opinion. The leaders of the English Reformation, from the time when the death of Henry VIII placed them firmly upon Protestant grounds, profess the doctrine of absolute as distinguished from conditional predestination." Harry Buis, *Historic Protestantism and Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958), 87.

tem of theology. On the contrary, as Dr. Wyllie asserts of the Synod, "It met at a great crisis and it was called to review, re-examine and authenticate over again, in the second generation since the rise of the Reformation, that body of truth and system of doctrine which that great movement had published to the world."[8]

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM

The issues involved in this historic controversy are indeed grave, for they vitally affect the Christian's concept of God, of sin, and of salvation. Packer, in contrasting these two systems, is certainly correct in asserting,

> The difference between them is not primarily one of emphasis, but of content. One proclaims a God Who saves; the other speaks of a God Who enables man to save himself. One view [Calvinism] presents the three great acts of the Holy Trinity for the recovering of lost mankind—election by the Father, redemption by the Son, calling by the Spirit—as directed towards the same persons, and as securing their salvation infallibly. The other view [Arminianism] gives each act a different reference (the objects of redemption being all mankind, of calling, those who hear the gospel, and of election, those hearers who respond), and denies that any man's salvation is secured by any of them. The two theologies thus conceive the plan of salvation in quite different terms. One makes salvation depend on the work of God,

8. Quoted by Warburton, *Calvinism,* 58. Smeaton says of the work of the Synod of Dort that "it may be questioned whether anything more valuable as an ecclesiastical testimony for the doctrines of sovereign, special, efficacious grace was ever prepared on this important theme since the days of the apostles" (Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,* 359).

the other on a work of man; one regards faith as part of God's gift of salvation, the other as man's own contribution to salvation; one gives all the glory of saving believers to God, the other divides the praise between God, Who, so to speak, built the machinery of salvation, and man, who by believing operated it. Plainly, these differences are important, and the permanent value of the "five points," as a summary of Calvinism, is that they make clear the points at which, and the extent to which, these two conceptions are at variance.[9]

THE *ONE* POINT OF CALVINISM

While recognizing the permanent value of the five points as a summary of Calvinism, Packer warns against simply equating Calvinism with the five points. He gives several excellent reasons why such an equation is incorrect, one of which we quote:

The very act of setting out Calvinistic soteriology [the doctrine of salvation] in the form of five distinct points (a number due, as we saw, merely to the fact that there were five Arminian points for the Synod of Dort to answer) tends to obscure the organic character of Calvinistic thought on this subject. For the five points, though separately stated, are really inseparable. They hang together; you cannot reject one without rejecting them all, at least in the sense in which the Synod meant them. For to Calvinism there is really only *one* point to be made in the field of soteriology: the point that *God saves sinners*. *God*—the Triune Jehovah, Father, Son and Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power and love to achieve the salvation of a chosen people, the Father electing, the Son fulfilling the

9. Packer, "Introductory Essay," 4–5.

Father's will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of Father and Son by renewing. *Saves*—does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory: plans, achieves and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies. *Sinners*—men as God finds them, guilty, vile, helpless, powerless, unable to lift a finger to do God's will or better their spiritual lot. *God saves sinners*—and the force of this confession may not be weakened by disrupting the unity of the work of the Trinity, or by dividing the achievement of salvation between God and man and making the decisive part man's own, or by soft-pedalling the sinner's inability so as to allow him to share the praise of his salvation with his Saviour. This is the one point of Calvinistic soteriology which the "five points" are concerned to establish and Arminianism in all its forms to deny: namely, that sinners do not save themselves in any sense at all, but that salvation, first and last, whole and entire, past, present and future, is of the Lord, to whom be glory for ever; amen.[10]

This brings to completion Part One of our survey. No attempt whatsoever has been made in this section to prove the truthfulness of the Calvinistic doctrines. Our sole purpose has been to give a brief history of the system and to explain its contents. We are now ready to consider its biblical support.

10. Ibid., 6. Italics are his.