

THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM: INTRODUCTION

We begin a short series on what are often called the five points of Calvinism. The name is unfortunate in some ways. We do not like calling ourselves after the name of a man; however great John Calvin was, he is not our master, and we do not necessarily agree with everything he said. Also the name “five points” suggests that the whole of the Reformed faith can be summed up in these points; but that is very far from being true. The five points tell us nothing about the doctrine of Scripture, nothing explicitly about the doctrines of the Trinity or the Incarnation, nothing about justification by faith, nothing about church life, government, and worship, and nothing about the Second Coming. No, the five points have a much more limited scope, and that is to tell us what the Reformed churches believe concerning a number of disputed doctrines. These disputed doctrines concern human nature and divine grace - the sin of man and the grace of God.

Why five points? Because originally, back in the early 17th century, there arose a controversial new movement within the Reformed churches, called "Arminianism", after its leader, Jacob Arminius, a Dutch theologian. The Arminians themselves drew up a document containing five points, in which they challenged the theology of the Reformed churches. In order to respond to this challenge, the Dutch Reformed Church called a special meeting, a synod, to which Reformed theologians from other countries came (including England, Scotland, Switzerland, and various parts of Germany). This was the famous Synod of Dort

(1618-19). This international Reformed synod then responded to the five points of Arminianism with its own five points. These have come to be known as the "five points of Calvinism". As a result of the Synod of Dort, the Arminians were cast out of the Reformed churches, and have ever since had their own separate church life, history, and traditions. The most famous British Arminian was of course John Wesley.

Since we are a Reformed church, it seems right that we should look together at these distinctive teachings of the Reformed faith regarding human sin and divine grace. We will be considering each of the five points from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, which will give us a convenient point of reference. Hopefully this series will both consolidate and deepen our understanding of Reformed theology, and its biblical basis.