

# The Gospel Message

In this position statement, the basic Gospel message presented in the Bible is briefly explained. The material below is divided into several sections: I. The Simple Gospel, II. The Biblical Description, III. Background, IV. The Biblical Doctrines of Grace, V. TULIP, VI. The Theology of Grace, VII. Advanced Theology, and VIII. Grace Applied.

## I. The Simple Gospel

The word “Gospel” simply means good news. Even a child does not have difficulty understanding the need for forgiveness and for a savior. The child can sing “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” However, there is a great deal more profundity in this simple child’s song than may first meet the eye. It is said that Karl Barth, when asked “What was the greatest theological discovery that he had made during his life?”, after thinking about it for some time, responded with “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Whatever you may think of Karl Barth as a theologian, this quotation serves to suggest that there is a considerable amount of doctrine and theology behind the “simple” Gospel. The remainder of this position statement is for those who would like a little more detail.

## II. The Biblical Description

The “Gospel” is described by the Apostle Paul in the following words:

“Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.”

I Corinthians 15:1–8 (NASB)

The above description of the Gospel by Paul may sound just a little strange to many contemporaries. Notice that there is no mention of personal faith in Jesus Christ, no vivid testimony of how one can accept Christ as savior, no words of personal struggle, no description of seeking God, no indication of making a decision for Christ, etc. What we do have is an appeal to history (Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures), and great emphasis on the

historical reality of the resurrection. It is all external to ourselves! To fully explain what Paul means requires studying what he has written elsewhere about the gospel and about Christ, but the essence here is that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah and Savior and Son of God, i.e., He indeed died for our sins, as attested by His resurrection! His sacrifice of Himself as an atonement for sins was accepted by God, again as attested by His resurrection.

The contrast with much of contemporary evangelicalism is noteworthy. There is nothing here about how faith in Christ will make one healthy, or wealthy, or will heal broken relationships. Such results are possible, but only distract from the gospel message. The gospel is about the horrible condition that mankind is in. Mankind's condition is one of sin and alienation from God, and of hopelessness, and of judgment to come. Man, in himself, can do nothing about it. But God has done something. He has made a way of escape from despair, and of restoration to fellowship with God, through the finished work of Jesus Christ.

### III. Background

Whereas the "Christian Foundations" position statement provides a big picture overview of the Christian faith, this position statement is concerned with the Gospel. Technically speaking, the word Gospel means good news, but in common parlance it means the basic message of the Bible about how to be properly related to God. Typically, the Gospel message does not usually include very important doctrines such as the Divinity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, Christ's Resurrection, the inerrancy of Scripture, etc., although these may be implied. The Gospel message is about our human condition before God and how we can be properly related to Him. A complete study of such things will likely include the Doctrine of Man, the Doctrine of God, Justification, and Sanctification. However, a brief presentation is referred to as the Five Points of Calvinism. If you are not from a church that holds to the Five Points of Calvinism, please hear me out (see the last paragraph in this section).

It is very easy to get so caught up in theological studies of one kind or another, or in church growth, or in missionary endeavors, or doctrines that divide one denomination from another, that the very basic teaching of the Bible about how to be properly related to God can be lost. If it is lost in teaching, in practice, and in personal experience, then what does any of the rest of Christianity matter? This is the core of Christianity. If it is lost, then all is lost.

While the Five Points of Calvinism have a long history, are contained within the Creeds of many denominations, and have had enormous influence on preaching, missions, evangelism, and as a foundation for Biblical studies and interpretation, it has always had its detractors. Most evangelical Christians today can be divided into either the Calvinistic camp or the Arminian camp. There are more recent movements such as Process Theology, etc., but to keep this position statement brief, only Calvinism and Arminianism will be contrasted. Arminianism has slowly gained ground over the last few centuries, and today may well represent the majority view in American evangelicalism. However, Arminianism is wrong (this is not just being stated without justification), and as demonstrated in the books below (in those books are found the justification), is unscriptural: that is, it is not the teaching of the Bible. However, Arminianism does often appeal to "common sense" and the philosophy of this age. The basic difference

between Calvinism and Arminianism on the basic Gospel message, is the difference between salvation being the work of God alone, and salvation ultimately being in the hands of men.

Having said that, however, it is important to remember that most people who become Christians as adults start out with Arminian views. R. C. Sproul writes in his *Chosen by God* (see below) how he had a significant change to Calvinism during his seminary days, primarily under the influence of John Gerstner. Others can testify to a similar change of mind. I don't think that Sproul considers that he was not a Christian prior to his change. We need to keep such things in mind! The Five Points of Calvinism help mature Christians understand what has taken place in their lives, and to give proper glory to God for it. It does not mean that our Arminian brothers are not Christians. We are to teach the Gospel with love. If we have a more mature understanding of these things we are not to use it as some self exalting hammer, but to be better servants. Nevertheless, many can testify that a good understanding of the doctrines of grace, as summarized in the five points of Calvinism, can be extremely helpful to the Christian desiring to know God and grow in sanctification.

#### IV. The Biblical Doctrines of Grace

Below are several books that explain the *doctrines* of the Five Points of Calvinism. In this section, the focus is upon the *doctrines* of the Five Points, and the Scriptural support for them. That is, this section is concerned with establishing that the Five Points are taught in the Bible.

David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, and Documented*, 2nd edition, P&R Publishing, 2004.

The second edition of this book is the fortieth anniversary edition: the first edition was published in 1963. The first edition was very well received, used, and distributed. R. C. Sproul writes on the back cover that "This latest edition is even better than the original." Phillip G. Ryken writes "The best and the most complete short introduction to the doctrines of grace." Briefly stated, this is probably the best book available on the five points of Calvinism. The complete book is just a little over 250 pages long. However, Part One, *The Five Points Defined: Their Origin and Contents*, which does as the title suggests, describes the five points, is only 15 pages. Part Two, *The Five Points Defined: Their Biblical Support*, which includes the full Scriptural passages printed, not just referred to, is another 55 pages. Therefore, this book succinctly states the five points, and then provides the Scripture that indicates that the Bible teaches these five points with great clarity. Part Three, which is much longer, provides a significant bibliography for those who wish to study the topics in detail. Then the book concludes with eight appendices, which are essays by several authors. This book is highly recommended as a very significant and useful introduction to the Five Points of Calvinism, and provides strong Scriptural reasons for concluding that these five points are taught in the Bible.

Dave Hunt and James White, *Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views*, Multnomah Publishers, 2004.

Among evangelicals, there are two dominant views concerning what the Bible teaches about the basic Gospel message: these doctrines include basic understandings about God, about the nature of man, and how a proper relationship with God is achieved. These two

views, as mentioned above, are usually labeled Calvinism and Arminianism. Usually a single book will present one side or the other. This book is unique in that it presents a debate between advocates of the two views. As the title suggests, the focus is on one of those views, namely Calvinism. James White argues for Calvinism, while Dave Hunt takes the opposing view. As iron sharpens iron, this approach is excellent in bringing both points of view to the question of the basic Gospel message. It is usually conceded that if you argue against Calvinism, you argue for Arminianism, as the two views are mutually exclusive. In my opinion, White wins this argument, but it can also be said that the questions and opinions of the other side, argued by Hunt, enhances just what it is that White argues for. The result is a far better understanding of the issues involved. I come away from this book feeling that Hunt does not really understand the issues. And yet, visiting his web site at <http://www.thebereanall.org>, and reading his statement of faith, etc., it is noted that he takes a strong position on many basic Christian doctrines. What this indicates, it seems to me, is that what one truly believes is seldom obvious, but rather takes critical discussion or debate to bring it out.

James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal of Norman Geisler's Chosen But Free*, second edition, Calvary Press, 2009.

This book by James White is primarily a rebuttal of Norman Geisler's book *Chosen But Free* (see immediately below) but he has written such a detailed rebuttal that it has become one of the best positive statements of the five points of Calvinism in print. There are more than twenty five endorsements for the book printed in this edition. Geisler claims to be a moderate Calvinist, but White finds little difference between Geisler's position and Arminianism. With careful exegesis, White shows where Geisler has gone astray, and in the process demonstrates that the Bible teaches each of the five points of Calvinism.

Norman L. Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of God's Sovereignty and Free Will*, third edition, Bethany House, 2010.

Geisler claims to be a "moderate Calvinist," but as White has found in the immediately above book, he is an Arminian, based on the doctrines that he writes and teaches. From this book by Geisler, there is no clear statement as to what he believes (there are contradictions, as pointed out by White), and there is no clear statement on his web site either. It would seem that he is one of the more out-spoken Arminians alive today. He may not embrace the label, but it seems to fit. This book by Geisler is included here only because it is the book that White is responding to immediately above, and White provides a very detailed defense of the doctrines of grace.

The five points of Calvinism were originally presented by the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) in the Netherlands in response to the five points of Arminianism. It is, therefore, a curiosity of history that the "Doctrines of Grace" agenda was set by Arminians. Often entire books devoted to the doctrines of grace limit themselves to these five points only. Yet, the greatest of all doctrines of grace, upon which the church stands or falls, namely the doctrine of justification by faith alone, while implicit within the five points of Calvinism, is not explicit there. Probably the best and most comprehensive book that presents the doctrine of justification by faith alone as the teaching of the Bible is the following one by White:

James R. White, *The God Who Justifies: A Comprehensive Study of the Doctrine of Justification*, Bethany House, 2001.

After spending several chapters on background material, White comes to what I consider to be the heart and most valuable contribution of this book, and that is the careful and detailed exegesis of Biblical passages establishing that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is what is taught in the Bible. White gives detailed exegesis of many passages from Romans and Galatians, but also from Ephesians, James, II Corinthians, and Titus. The book is endorsed by Richard D. Phillips, James M. Renihan, Fred G. Zaspel, Maurice Roberts, Joel R. Beeke, and Jay E. Adams.

## V. TULIP

A well-known acronym that describes the so-called five points of Calvinism is TULIP, where each letter represents one of the five points: T for Total depravity, U for Unconditional election, L for Limited atonement, I for Irresistible grace, and P for Perseverance of the saints. The letters form a logical progression of Biblical doctrine as to a Christian's relationship to God. Each of these five points is well documented as being what the Bible teaches by the references given in the previous section. There are Christians, primarily Arminians, who dispute one or more of these five points. However, the real concern for every Christian should be to determine what the Bible teaches, and not what one might prefer given their current way of thinking, often greatly influenced by non-Christian philosophy of our culture. Many have come to love these doctrines as they present a consistent and logical understanding of how God interacts with His fallen creatures, and yields a great deal of understanding about the world around us.

For example, total depravity, when fully understood, yields a mature understanding of fallen mankind's present condition. It goes a long way toward understanding all the wars, crime, and violence in this world. In Christian doctrine, it explains why it is that an individual can contribute nothing in securing his own salvation. The Bible describes man as lost in sin and spiritually dead, unable to do anything pleasing to God apart from His redeeming grace.

Given total depravity, the absolute need for unconditional election becomes clear. God, in His infinite wisdom, and for reasons presently unknown to us, has elected some to eternal life through His Son Jesus Christ. God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves: without His election, none would be saved. These are sobering thoughts to be sure, but this is what the Bible reveals.

Limited atonement is perhaps the most disputed doctrine of the five points, but it follows logically from the first two. Given unconditional election and that not all are Christians, it follows that Christ's atonement did not apply to all, only to the elect. Considering the alternatives should make this clear. If Christ's death did in fact actually atone for a particular individual, that is that Christ's righteousness has been imputed to that person and his sins imputed to Christ, then that person must at some point become a believer in Christ. Otherwise, Christ's atonement for that person would be ineffectual, which surely cannot be the case.

It also follows that if God does the electing, and Jesus Christ provided the atonement for the elect, that God would then call each member of the elect to faith in Christ via the work of the Holy Spirit and the hearing of His Word by an irresistible grace. If God's grace in election could be effectually resisted, then that would mean that God's election could be thwarted and Christ's atonement made of no effect.

It then logically follows that, given unconditional election, limited atonement, and irresistible grace, that each member of the elect will persevere unto the end. This does not mean that a Christian will never sin, or even go through a period where it may appear that he has seriously backslidden even to the point of living as though he has denied Christ. History, and especially examples in the Bible, as David, illustrate otherwise. What it means is, in the end, every member of the elect will persevere unto the end. Christ has promised this, and given that justification is the work of God alone, how could it be otherwise. This can be of great assurance to a doubting believer perhaps overly scrupulous about their own sins. It does not at all allow for any believer to be presumptuous.

The above briefly summarized five points, in my opinion, should strongly suggest that these doctrines are of crucial importance. While it is true that one need not have a thorough understanding of these doctrines, or even to have heard of them, to be a Christian, it is also true that as one matures in the faith and desires to know God more intimately that these doctrines are of vital importance. Some of those who profess adherence to these doctrines act as though somehow they are not critical to the Christian faith. This is bewildering to me. For those of us who did not have the privilege of a Christian upbringing and were called to faith as adults, and have wandered for years attempting to come to a mature understanding of such matters, these doctrines are life affirming. They are the theological foundation of understanding the Christian faith.

One more comment. Some seem to think that TULIP teaches that there is nothing for the Christian to do. This is a misunderstanding. We should keep in mind that the Bible is the revelation of God to Christians, to believers, and not to those outside of the church universal. It may have some apologetic value, or historical interest, etc., to non-Christians, but, again, it is God's revelation of Himself to believers. The Bible is full of admonitions to follow the Lord, repent of sin, seek His face, etc. These teachings are for believers. The parable of the sower should be sufficient to convince us of this. Also, bear in mind that judgment will begin with the house of God. Paul teaches us about gold, silver, wood and stubble as the result of such judgment. We are to examine ourselves as to whether or not we are numbered among the elect, and if we think so, what evidence do we have for it? And if we are convinced that we are, then love for the things of God should indeed flow from it. God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We cannot be justified by works, by any efforts of our own. But, works will flow from a redeemed person's life. We are justified by the work of Christ, that we may bear good works that are pleasing to God.

## VI. The Theology of Grace

Below are several books that explain the *theology* of the Five Points of Calvinism. These books go beyond merely the doctrines of the Five Points with Scriptural support, but rather include the

interactions between Scriptural passages and rational, philosophical, reasoning to further explain and understand the Scriptural teaching.

Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I am not an Arminian*, InterVarsity Press, 2004.

This book and the immediately following one form a pair, published by InterVarsity Press, with the purpose of presenting the two dominant views among evangelical Christians. To get a balanced perspective, both should be read. A review of this book is posted on this web site. To see the review, click [here](#).

Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I am not a Calvinist*, InterVarsity Press, 2004.

See the immediately above book, which together form a pair. A review of this book is posted on this web site. To see the review, click [here](#).

R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God: Know God's perfect plan for His glory and His children*, Tyndale House, 1994.

This is a popular theological book on predestination, that attempts to explain that while we certainly have the perception that we choose God, and indeed Christians do, yet in reality behind the scenes it is really God who has chosen us. From the back cover of the book: "Predestination doesn't create a whimsical or spiteful picture of God, but paints the portrait of a loving God who provides redemption for radically corrupt humans." The doctrine of predestination is not easy, yet it is taught in Scripture. Part of the difficulty that it poses for many of us, is our undeveloped view of the nature of fallen mankind. As Sproul puts it on page 34: "Non-Reformed views of predestination assume that every fallen person is left with the capacity to choose Christ. Man is not viewed as being so fallen that it requires the direct intervention of God to the degree that Calvinism asserts." This book provides a popular introduction to this subject.

James Montgomery Boice and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace: Rediscovering the Evangelical Gospel*, Crossway Books, 2009 [first published in 2002].

This book is the final one that Boice wrote. He was writing it, but had not completed it, prior to his death in 2000. Ryken, who was already an associate pastor at Boice's Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia at the time, and became Boice's replacement as senior pastor, completed the volume. Boice knew he was dying, and it was the doctrines of grace that were on his mind. This book presents an excellent discussion of the doctrines of grace.

James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of Its History in the Church and of Its Exposition from Scripture*, Solid Ground Christian Books, 2006 [first published in 1867].

Whereas James White's book mentioned above (*The God Who Justifies*) makes the valuable contribution that justification by faith alone is taught in the Bible as the only means by which to be made right in the sight of God, this book by Buchanan may well be the best book available on the theology of this doctrine. This SGCB reprint has a forward by Gerald P. Bilkes, an introduction by Roger Nicole, and is endorsed by Ligon Duncan, Nick Willborn, and Joel R. Beeke. Beeke writes on the back cover: "If you can only afford to read one book on justification, read this definitive work." The first part of the

book is on the history of the doctrine of justification, starting with the Old Testament, then continuing with the Apostles up through modern (for Buchanan) times. Since little, if anything, is new in theology, this work is surprisingly relevant today. The second part of the book is on exposition of the doctrine justification, beginning with the meaning of the term “justification,” and continuing through its relation to the work of the Holy Spirit.

## VII. Advanced Theology

As one studies the doctrines of grace, it becomes increasingly apparent that the five points of Calvinism stand or fall together. They form a consistent world view of man, God, and how the two may be united. The first step, as indicated above, is that these are the doctrines taught in Scripture. Then, by studying the theology of grace, one can gain additional insights as to the way these doctrines hang together, and how they philosophically and rationally make sense of ourselves and the world we live in. A final step in this development is coming to a mature understanding of the nature of man and questions concerning autonomy and free will. This, ultimately, is probably the heart of the differences between Calvinists and Arminians. Does man have the final say about being a Christian or not? Does man have the ability to respond to the Gospel message by an act of his free will? Did Christ, by His death on the cross, actually save individuals, or did He just make salvation possible and He awaits our individual decisions? These questions concerning free will have been discussed for two millennia by Christians, and they, or related questions such as the basic question as to whether there is any such thing as a free will are actively pursued by secular philosophers also. Secular philosophers who study the concept of free will, may well be concerned with the very meaning of human life, as something beyond mere animal life, or whether there is such a thing as mind, or soul. By far the best and most influential book on free will written by a Calvinist is the one by Jonathan Edwards. Recently, a paperback version of this book has been made available by Yale University Press:

Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, edited by Paul Ramsay, Vol. 1 in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Yale University Press, 2009 [hardcopy published in 1957].

According to Perry Miller, general editor of the Yale Works of Jonathan Edwards, this book “is the work through which his [Edwards] fame has been most widely spread abroad”, and he refers to him, reflecting Ramsay, as “the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene”. Edwards himself, in his preface writes, “The subject is of such importance, as to *demand* attention, and the most thorough consideration. Of all kinds of knowledge that we can ever obtain, the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves, are the most important.” Edwards’ primary purpose in writing *Freedom of the Will* was to refute Arminianism.

Another key concept in what I am calling advanced theology is the sovereignty of God. This appears to also be a major difference between Arminians and Calvinists, and can be an almost impossible stumbling block for the secular mind. I assume that all Christians profess that God is sovereign over all of creation, but there are differences as to just what it means for God to be sovereign. In the light of the study of the freedom of the will, as presented by Edwards, man is quite limited as to what he can do. While mankind is physically free to believe in Christ, inasmuch as there are no physical constraints preventing him if he has heard the Gospel



Message, but he is not morally free to do so. Responding to the Gospel includes submitting to God as sovereign Lord over all, something that is repulsive to secular mankind. Such being the case, in order for a specific individual to respond to the Gospel requires a sovereign act of grace by God. While this is presented in the material referenced above, a more advanced and scholarly presentation is given by John Piper in the book below. The title, *The Justification of God*, refers to the Apostle Paul's argument that God is *just* in choosing some for life in Christ, and bypassing others:

John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*, second edition, Baker Academic, 1993.

John Piper has written several well-received books, but this one is probably his most scholarly, detailed, and advanced. He spends over 200 pages explaining the first 23 verses in Romans, chapter 9, one of the more controversial passages of Scripture, as it not only states clearly the sovereignty of God in salvation, but also argues that God is just in his sovereign acts in salvation. There is a good deal of background study of the perspective that Paul is coming from, many footnotes, and a fair amount of Hebrew and Greek, but not such that he cannot be understood by those without knowledge of the original languages.

## VIII. Grace Applied

The above doctrines of grace and accompanying theology will remain academic unless applied in a personal way. The following books explain how to so apply these doctrines of grace.

Horatius Bonar and Charles Hodge, *Not What My Hands Have Done*, Trinity Foundation, 2005.

The Protestant Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone through Christ alone is probably the most important doctrine to come out of the Reformation, at least Martin Luther thought so. This is how the above Five Points of Calvinism are applied to an individual. For a review of this book (really two books, one by Bonar and one by Hodge, in the same volume), click [here](#).

John Piper, *Finally Alive: What Happens When We Are Born Again*, Christian Focus Publications, 2009.

This book on new life in Christ and what it means, is endorsed by many, such as D. A. Carson, Ian Murray, Bruce Ware, and J. I. Packer. In endorsing this book, Thabiti Anyabwile writes in part as follows: “The *doctrine* of the new birth is cheapened and hidden because so many ‘professing Christians’ have not experienced the *reality* of the new birth. The *reality* of the new birth is seemingly so little celebrated because so few understand the majestic *doctrine* of the new birth.” This book by John Piper is a good introduction to this subject. It may be obtained from Amazon, as well as other book distributors, however, it is also available free, in pdf format, from the following web site: <http://www.desiringgod.org/store/books/finally-alive>