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# THE POINTS OF CALVINISM: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

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If one gave credence only to anecdotal evidence, one might conclude that the venerable ‘Five Points of Calvinism’, customarily summarized by the acronym of TULIP, have an unclouded future. To name just two pieces of evidence, one could point to the publication by Zondervan in 2004 of Richard Mouw’s title of intriguing name, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport* and the September, 2006 *Christianity Today* feature story by Collin Hansen, ‘Young, Restless and Reformed’.<sup>1</sup> Surely, any movement with enough momentum to generate a sympathetic volume from the pen of a major seminary president *and* a story in America’s widest-read Christian periodical – a story reflecting a massive ‘twenty-something’ movement, newly-enamored with these same ideas – is not about to expire. Who would have ever anticipated that the evangelicalism of ‘middle America’ reflected in *Christianity Today* would be displaying Calvinism’s contested ‘points’ in a story sidebar? And yet, there they were in all their vigor in the September 2006 issue.

It is the contention of this paper that all such recent appearances of a Calvinist resurgence notwithstanding, the modern Calvinist movement is conflicted – and conflicted over the manner in which appeals to these very points are to be made. I am referring to the points which have been summarized by the acronym TULIP.

## I. A DISCERNIBLE DISTINCTION AS TO HOW APPEALS ARE BEING MADE TO TULIP

There exists what I will term a ‘sovereign grace’ school and an ‘apologetic’ school of Calvinism. Before elaborating on this distinction, I must first maintain that both tendencies accept that the points summarized by TULIP are a faithful kind of ‘theological shorthand’ for a much more

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). *Christianity Today*, September 2006, 32-38. Collin Hansen of *Christianity Today* has expanded his magazine article into a book of the same name, *Young, Restless and Reformed* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

comprehensive statement of Calvinist soteriology delivered at the international Reformed Synod hosted at Dordrecht, the Netherlands in 1618-19.<sup>2</sup> Both tendencies realize that this was a Synod summoned to deal with the challenge to Calvinist orthodoxy associated with the pastoral and academic career of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609).

The first tendency, which I designate 'sovereign grace', is concerned first and foremost to champion God's purposing an omnipotent electing grace towards undeserving persons who belonged to the common mass of fallen humanity.<sup>3</sup> For the 'sovereign grace' Calvinist, the TULIP acronym is sacrosanct; it is a historic formula understood to have been bequeathed to us by our forebears. Dislike and scorn of TULIP is reckoned as being akin to negative attitudes towards Bible and Gospel; unbelievers misjudge them all. The second tendency, I designate 'apologetic', not because those displaying this tendency are any less zealous in their advocacy of an omnipotent electing grace, but because they show a heightened awareness that the doctrines summarized under the rubric of TULIP are capable of being grossly misunderstood. (Total Depravity, Limited Atonement and Irresistible Grace are the items most often admitted to be problematic). The Calvinist writers I term 'apologetic' are ready both to re-state the doctrines summarized in TULIP and to alter that acronym, as necessary, to more effectively communicate what they consider to be the actual meaning of the points.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The best two accounts in English of the international synod at Dordrecht are Allan F. Sell, *The Great Debate*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) and P.Y. DeJong, ed. *Crisis in the Reformed Churches* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968)

<sup>3</sup> Examples of this 'sovereign grace' approach would be such items as David Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism Defined, Documented and Defended*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963). Jack Seaton, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, (Edinburgh: Banner, 1970), and Arthur C. Custance, *The Sovereignty of Grace*, (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Examples of the 'apologetic' school would include such writers as Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism: A Study Guide*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), John R. DeWitt, author of *What is the Reformed Faith?*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981); R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); Roger Nicole, *Our Sovereign Savior*, (Fearn, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2002); James Boice, and Philip Ryken *The Doctrines of Grace*, (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2002), and more recently both Richard Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*, (Zondervan: 2004) and Robert Peterson and Michael Williams, *Why I am Not an Arminian* (Inter Varsity: 2004). In a class by itself is the winsome popular work of Timothy F. George, *Amazing Grace: God's Initiative – Our Response*, (Nashville: Life Way Press, 2002).

## II. THOUGH DISTINGUISHABLE IN THESE WAYS, BOTH TENDENCIES LABOR UNDER A COMMON MISUNDERSTANDING.

Though my personal sympathies are entirely with the ‘apologetic’ tendency, united in its determination to prevent gross misunderstandings of what TULIP represents, it appears that both tendencies are unwittingly working from a mistaken premise. And that mistaken premise is the common assumption that the acronym TULIP is itself historic. Both ‘sovereign grace’ and ‘apologetic’ Calvinists equally suppose that the points are a time-honored and authentic representation from the dim Calvinist past which gives us a proper distillation of what was achieved at Dordt in the face of the early Arminian challenge. This paper aims to establish that this is an unwarranted belief; in consequence we should be able to locate both more historically accurate methods of summarizing the message of Dordt *and* to consider some faithful contemporary ways of re-articulating this message. Let us proceed by moving from our own times to earlier days.

### III.i EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT THE ACRONYM, TULIP, MAY BE OF MERE TWENTIETH-CENTURY ORIGIN.

Many can remember initially encountering the points of Calvinism through the large booklet of the writers, Steele and Thomas. When in 1963, David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas released their *The Five Points of Calvinism Defined, Defended, Documented*<sup>5</sup> and in the process helped to popularize the TULIP acronym, a reader might easily have supposed that they were relaying a formula of considerable vintage. Steele and Thomas apparently believed so, and it appears that they were in good company. The renowned Reformation historian, the late Lewis W. Spitz of Stanford University (and formerly of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis) though he disapproved of the acronym, spoke of it in 1971 as by then a ‘familiar caricature of Calvin’s theology’.<sup>6</sup> Wheaton College’s Earle E. Cairns had

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Designed for Southern Baptist readers unfamiliar with, or suspicious of TULIP, the author substitutes the alternate acrostic ROSES.

<sup>5</sup> Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 1963. Roger Nicole, then of Gordon Divinity School, the predecessor of today’s Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, supplied a preface. The 2004 expanded reprint edition of the 1963 volume makes plain that the authors, David Steele (now deceased) and Curtis Thomas wrote their 1963 volume from within a ‘Bible Church’ stance.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, Vol. 2, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), 417.

just as confidently used the acronym (he called it a ‘mnemonic device’) in his 1953 *Christianity Through the Centuries*.<sup>7</sup>

But to return to Steele and Thomas, the intriguing thing one finds on reading their booklet closely is that of the older works on Calvinist history and theology which they relied upon in their preparation to write on this subject, only *one* utilized the TULIP acronym. Ben A. Warburton, whose 1955 work *Calvinism: Its History and Basic Principles*<sup>8</sup> was one of their chief authorities, did not. B.B. Warfield (1851-1921), the late professor of theology at Princeton had, neither in his short work, *The Plan of Salvation*, (1915) nor in the shorter pieces published in the posthumous collection of writings, *Calvin and Calvinism*, (1929) used this acronym.<sup>9</sup> J.I. Packer, who contributed an ‘Introductory Essay’ to the 1959 reprint of John Owen’s particularistic *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (1647), was clearly a resource for these authors; yet Packer did not use the acronym.<sup>10</sup> The one clear source drawn on by Steele and Thomas which *did* employ the TULIP acronym was Loraine Boettner’s *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (1932).<sup>11</sup> Evidently then, Steele and Thomas were not the originators of TULIP but only among its most successful popularizers; the acronym has a shadowy history extending back to Boettner’s utilization of it, and perhaps beyond.<sup>12</sup>

### III.ii THE TULIP ACRONYM IS EVEN MORE ELUSIVE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The nineteenth century had many advocates for Calvinism, and for the theology of Dordt; but not one emerges as an advocate of this acronym. Robert L. Dabney (1820-1898) of Union Seminary, Virginia, and subsequently Austin Seminary, Texas composed a small volume on the subject

<sup>7</sup> Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, (Zondervan:1953), 336, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1955. One discerns in a reading of Warburton that he writes from a context outside North America.

<sup>9</sup> Warfield’s essay, ‘Calvinism’, which had originally appeared in the *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. 2 is reprinted in the *Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), V. 353-372. At p. 363, Warfield describes the points of Calvinism but does not employ the acronym.

<sup>10</sup> I have consulted the introductory essay in a free-standing undated reprint, produced circa 1969. Note especially Packer’s description of the five points at p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1932), 59, 60.

<sup>12</sup> Boettner’s discussion and use of TULIP is cautious and restrained.

in 1895. The Presbyterian from the American south was hardly an ‘eager beaver’ for the points, for he introduced his volume with the words ‘this title (the Five Points of Calvinism) is of little accuracy or worth; I use it to denote certain points of doctrine, because custom has made it familiar’.<sup>13</sup> Like many writers of that century, he wrote on behalf of the points of Dordt and yet took liberty to describe them in his own way. He would discuss ‘Total Depravity’ but as part of a wider discussion of Original Sin and the Inability of the Will; he would *not* expound ‘Irresistible Grace’ but rather effectual calling or regeneration.<sup>14</sup> Election, he expounded primarily in terms taken from his own denomination’s *Westminster Confession of Faith*; Particular redemption, *not* Limited Atonement was the way he expressed his conviction that the death of Christ served a design.<sup>15</sup> He *did* espouse the Perseverance of the Saints in language familiar to those who know TULIP.

William Parks, was the mid-Victorian Anglican vicar of Openshaw, near Manchester. A high Calvinist in the tradition of Augustus Toplady (1740-1778), he utilized the season of Lent in 1856 to preach a series of sermons, published as *Sermons on the Five Points of Calvinism*.<sup>16</sup> The high Calvinist organization, the Sovereign Grace Union, kept these sermons in print into the next century.<sup>17</sup> But for all their associations with rigor, Parks’ sermon themes were hardly abrasive; ‘The Fall of Man’, ‘Election’, ‘Particular Redemption’, ‘Effectual Calling’, and ‘Final Perseverance’ were his way of articulating what he took to be the doctrinal legacy of Dordt. Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), the Scottish minister and hymn writer, had written in defense of Calvinistic doctrines in 1846 in

<sup>13</sup> Robert L. Dabney, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, (Richmond: 1895). 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 8, 25.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 38, 60. This same doctrinal posture is discernible in the ministerial career of Dabney’s contemporary, B.M. Palmer (1818-1902). His biographer, Thomas Carey Johnson, reports of Palmer, of New Orleans ‘He even preached boldly and frequently on those points of Calvinism which have been so bitterly attacked in every generation, viz: Total Depravity, unconditional election, particular redemption, efficacious grace, and perseverance therein unto the end’; Thomas Cary Johnson, *Life of B.M. Palmer*, (1906, Reprinted Edinburgh: Banner, 1987), 660. I am indebted to a colleague, Dr. Daphne Haddad, for this reference.

<sup>16</sup> Note the brief reference to Parks in Ian J. Shaw, *High Calvinists in Action: Calvinism and the City: Manchester and London 1810-1860*, (Oxford: 2002), 17 and fn.33.

<sup>17</sup> I have used the edition produced by Farncombe and Sons, (London: 1915).

a small volume of published letters, *Truth and Error*.<sup>18</sup> In this volume, Bonar took up the doctrines emphasized at Dordt and felt at liberty to re-phrase them in what he believed to be a timely way. What under TULIP would be called Total Depravity, Bonar tackles as 'God's Will and Man's Will'; rather than Unconditional Election, he speaks of 'Predestination and Foreknowledge'. He will speak of neither Limited nor Particular Atonement by name, but simply of 'The Work of Christ'.<sup>19</sup>

C.H. Spurgeon (1834- 1892) devoted a chapter of his autobiography to describing his own Calvinist stance. He gladly identified himself as one believing and preaching the five Calvinist points, and yet refrained from identifying them in the manner we have grown accustomed to in our time. Typical of his viewpoint are the lines:

I do not believe we can preach the gospel if we do not preach justification by faith, without works; nor unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel, unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called...<sup>20</sup>

Here, admittedly, is but a sample of nineteenth century Calvinism; yet neither in the U.S.A., England, or Scotland were those ready to 'stand up' for Calvinism concerned to state the doctrines in any particularly aggressive or uniform way. Their concern was to restate the doctrines carefully and modestly in an era when theological change was in the wind.

### III.iii THE TULIP ACRONYM IS SIMILARLY ELUSIVE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

You may not, by now, be surprised to learn that the acronym cannot be located in the preceding century either, that century which followed immediately on after the epoch of the Synod of Dordt and the Westminster Assembly. As the eighteenth century closed, there were Anglican evan-

<sup>18</sup> *Truth and Error*, (New York: Carter Brothers, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1850). The volume seems to reflect the Scottish upheaval over Calvinism in the 1840's stirred up by James Morrison, who left the Scottish Secession Church to found the Evangelical Union. The theological controversies of the period are surveyed in Ian Hamilton, *The Erosion of Calvinist Orthodoxy: Seceders and Subscription in Scottish Presbyterianism*, (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> Letters 2, 4, 5.

<sup>20</sup> C.H. Spurgeon: *The Early Years 1834-1859*, (London: Banner of Truth, 1967), 168

gelicals like Thomas Scott (of *Commentary* fame) and his contemporary, Thomas Haweis (a founding sponsor of the London Missionary Society in 1795) doing battle with their bishop of Lincoln, George Tomline. The latter, both in his *Elements of Christian Theology* (1801) and *Refutation of Modern Calvinism* (1811) laid at the feet of these Georgian evangelicals charges such as that they believed that the fall of Adam had meant that his descendants had ‘lost all distinctions of right and wrong’, and that they preached their ‘favourite tenets of instantaneous conversion and indefectible grace’; he was certain that their ‘preaching of free justification’ had led to the neglect of good works and denied that in the atonement of Christ there was any design to redeem particular persons.<sup>21</sup>

Haweis and Scott each replied to Tomline in defense of what they took to be the basic Calvinism of their Elizabethan Anglican Articles of Religion. Each knew that their English church had been represented by delegates at the seventeenth century Synod of Dordt; each also believed that it was the recovery of the gospel of free justification in the awakening of the eighteenth century that was the real target of their bishop’s criticisms. Scott believed that if left unanswered, his bishop would ‘sweep away at once the labors of his whole life’.<sup>22</sup> Yet their response to this provocation was measured; they were determined not to contend for the Calvinist ‘system’ so much as what they termed ‘our common Christianity’, i.e. things held in common by all Scriptural Christians. Within this framework, Haweis and Scott were prepared to contend for Calvinist doctrine of the broad-brush variety. It is in defense of ‘Original Sin and Incurable Depravity’, it is ‘On Free Will’; it is on ‘Regeneration and Conversion’ that they write. As to the extent of redemption, Scott – like the Anglican delegates to Dordt- preferred ‘General Redemption’, and yet allowed that there were others holding a narrower view. He maintained ‘Perseverance’,

<sup>21</sup> *A Refutation of Modern Calvinism*, (London: 1811), 3, 91, 94, 166, 185.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Scott, *A Reply to Tomline’s ‘Refutation of Calvinism’*, (London: 1811), xiv. Beyond Scott and Haweis, there were at least two other evangelical Protestant responses to the provocation issued by Tomline. The Congregationalist divine of Rotherham Academy, Edward Williams (1750-1813) published his *A Defense of Modern Calvinism: A Reply to the Bishop of Lincoln* (London, 1812) while another individual, a nonconformist schoolteacher of Truro, Cornwall, John Allen (1771-1839) rose to the occasion by providing the first nineteenth century English translation of Calvin’s *Institutes*. On Williams, s.v. ‘Williams, Edward’ in the Timothy Larsen, ed. *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (Downers Grove, IVP, 2003); Allen’s translation of Calvin is discussed in ‘The Literary History of Calvin’s *Institutes*’ in *The Works of B.B. Warfield*, V (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 421



while allowing that 'not all who contend for perseverance will enjoy it'.<sup>23</sup> In a further attempt to resist the disparaging of these central evangelical doctrines, Thomas Scott provided his readers with the first nineteenth century translation, in English, of the actual Canons of Dordt, from the Latin text made available at Oxford in 1804 as *Sylloge Confessionum*.<sup>24</sup>

The hymnwriter and theological controversialist, Augustus Toplady (1740-1778) – so fierce in his attempts to counter John Wesley's Arminian teaching, similarly conforms to the pattern we have described. In two treatises, *The Church of England Vindicated from the Charge of Arminianism* (1769) and *Historic Proof of The Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England* (1774), we come no closer to a rehearsing of the 'points' as they are now familiarly summarized in TULIP than references to 'predestination unto life and regeneration by the Spirit of God', and 'gratuitous and irreversible election ... from whence a limited redemption necessarily follows'.<sup>25</sup> Only *this* from him who was the best source of information about Dordt, in English, in the eighteenth century!<sup>26</sup> The point is *not* that Toplady is a reticent Calvinist, but only that his attempts to uphold the integrity of the system he holds dear do not involve him in the use of the Procrustean formula<sup>27</sup> many have come to accept uncritically as a hallmark of Calvinist orthodoxy.

In certain broad features, this approach to the points of Calvinism had been anticipated in the early decades of the century by three writers;

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* 2-9, 51, 227, 473, 634. The role and stance of the delegates to Dordt appointed by the current monarch, James I, has been explored in two articles by Michael Dewar, 'The British Delegation at the Synod of Dort', *Evangelical Quarterly*, XLVI (1974) no.2 pp. 103-116 and 'The British Delegation at the Synod of Dort: Assembling and Assembled Returning and Returned', *Churchman*, 106 (1992), no. 2, 131-146. See also John Platt, 'Eirenical Anglicans at the Synod of Dort' in Derek Baker, ed. *Reform and Reformation*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1979), 221-43.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 725. Scott provided an enlarged edition of the Canons of Dordt in 1818, with historical commentary. An American edition, with endorsement of Samuel Miller of Princeton, was published in 1840.

<sup>25</sup> Augustus M. Toplady, *Works*, Vols. 1, 2, 5 (London: 1828). The quotations here are found at Vol. 5, pages 5, 46.

<sup>26</sup> In his *Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism* (vols. 1&2 *supra*) Toplady provides an epoch by epoch account of the embrace of and influence of Reformed theology in the Church of England from Henry VIII forward. He shows that he has digested all the standard seventeenth century correspondence and eyewitness accounts of the English delegates to Dordt at Vol. 2, pages 226-268.

<sup>27</sup> I introduce this term advisedly, using it in the sense of 'aiming to produce a conformity by arbitrary means'.

a Baptist, a Congregationalist, and an Anglican. All three took up their pens in a context dominated by the writings of the liberal Anglican writer, Daniel Whitby (1637-1726); the latter had thrown down the gauntlet to Calvinists by his work, *A Discourse on the True Import of the Words Election and Reprobation*, (London, 1710). In this, Whitby had assailed the theological legacy of Dordt by writing dismissively of the imputation of Adam's sin, of election, and particular atonement.<sup>28</sup> Taking the respondents beginning with the more recent, we can note that John Gill issued a three-part work, *The Cause of God and Truth*, commencing in 1735. It is significant that the 'heads' under which Gill defends the Calvinist scheme are, once more, not the heads which have become familiar to us in recent times. Gill writes in defense of Reprobation, Election, Redemption, Efficacious Grace, and Perseverance.<sup>29</sup>

Thomas Ridgley (1667-1734), was a Congregationalist divine and tutor. His *A Body of Divinity* (1731) was a thoughtful statement of Reformed theology using the framework of the Westminster Larger Catechism. As in Gill, the theology of Dordt was safeguarded and protected – but without any fixed method of referring to it. Written as a vindication of orthodoxy against current misrepresentation,<sup>30</sup> the *Body of Divinity* is also straightforward theological exposition. Ridgley steers deftly through the contested questions of the decrees of God, election and predestination, original sin, effectual calling, the extent of the atonement, and perseverance – all with an eye to judicious and moderate statement. There is no doubt that Ridgley is a Dordtian Calvinist – and yet he is a writer who feels compelled to be embracive and expansive, and above all Scriptural.<sup>31</sup>

The Anglican, John Edwards (1637-1716) wrote two works in defense of the points of Calvinism: *Veritas Redux*<sup>32</sup> (1707) and a smaller book-

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<sup>28</sup> Whitby had circulated these attacks in his *Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* (1700-1703) and his *A Discourse on the True Import of the Words Election and Reprobation*, (London: 1710). This latter title was popularly known as *Whitby on the Five Points*. I have argued in an earlier, still-unpublished paper, *The Strange Reemergence of the Points of Calvinism 1700-1820* that it was the polemical writing of Whitby after 1700 which provided an occasion for Calvinist theologians to 'rally round' Dordt when this might not otherwise have been their priority.

<sup>29</sup> Gill's separate treatment of the doctrine of reprobation (discussed in conjunction with Election in the Canons of Dordt) tells us something of importance about the theological tendency of this high Calvinist.

<sup>30</sup> Preface to *Body of Divinity*.

<sup>31</sup> *Body of Divinity*, I, 204 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards intimated in his *Veritas Redux* that he envisioned this volume being but the first part of a more extensive *Body of Divinity*. There is no evidence

pamphlet *The Scripture Doctrine of the Five Points* (1715). Though the volumes differed in bulk, they were the same in tone. Edwards – a kind of J.I. Packer in his day – used his vivacious writing skills to help his readers to see that Whitby’s attack on Calvinism was an attack on the vitals of evangelical religion.

The Divine decrees, the impotency of man’s free will, original sin, grace and conversion, the extent of Christ’s redemption, and perseverance are interwoven with the greatest and most substantial articles of the Christian faith... There is a necessity of preaching these in order to understand the main principles of our Christian belief.<sup>33</sup>

As for the five points themselves, Edwards provided a paraphrase based on his own direct knowledge of the Canons of Dordt. He was ready to sketch out ‘The Eternal Decrees’, ‘Free Will’, ‘Grace and Conversion’, ‘The Extent of Christ’s Redemption and Universal Grace’ and ‘The Perseverance of the Saints’.<sup>34</sup> His way of doing so created the impression that there was no ‘rigid’ form of the points needing to be adhered to at all costs.

This writer believes that a sufficient sampling has been surveyed so that we may now move beyond it to something more demanding still – an attempt to learn lessons for the present and future use of the Calvinist points.

#### IV. OBSERVATIONS AND INFERENCES FROM THE PRECEDING SURVEY

Late twentieth and early twenty-first century advocates of five-point Calvinism – whether of the ‘sovereign grace’ or ‘apologetic’ school – have been wedded to the TULIP formula since at least 1932<sup>35</sup> in a way un-

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that this larger project was ever realized. It is commendable that Steele and Thomas, in their *Five Points of Calvinism* (1963) are conversant with Edwards and list him in their bibliography.

<sup>33</sup> *Veritas Redux*, vii, x.

<sup>34</sup> *The Scripture Doctrine of the Five Points*, (London: 1715).

<sup>35</sup> It is not the present writer’s belief that Loraine Boettner himself devised this acronym at the time of the writing of his *Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* in 1932. The writer has simply been unable, to date, to document any earlier use of it. This seems also to be the conclusion drawn by Roger Nicole. In his preface to the fortieth anniversary edition of Steele and Thomas’ *Five Points of Calvinism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), xiv, he simply states, ‘Ever since the appearance of Loraine Boettner’s magisterial *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* it has been customary to refer to the five points according to the acrostic TULIP’. For a possible allusion to the

characteristic of Calvinists of any earlier era. Even those who have felt that the acronym could be improved upon have done their fine-tuning of it wearing 'kid gloves' as it were, so anxious were they to avoid the appearance of violating a time-honored and venerable formula. As the acronym is apparently no older than the early twentieth century, we must ask ourselves what the pervasive use of this acronym says about those who utilize it. At very least, this use suggests that they have not understood their own past very well. At worst, it may mean that they have willingly consented to take a very loose rendering of the theology of Dordt in place of the actuality.

The obverse of this first principle is that Calvinists of the nineteenth century and earlier could be positively 'breezy' in their handling of and naming the points of Calvinism, all the while defending their actual substance. Would any early twenty-first century conservative Calvinist worth his salt speak so casually as Dabney, who – as has been indicated- said that 'the title (five points of Calvinism) was of little accuracy or worth...I use it because custom has made it familiar'? This open-minded eclecticism has given way to a more slavish, unquestioning loyalty and use.

To be fair, we have not often enough heeded the cautions of those twentieth-century writers who, while embracing or alluding to the TULIP framework, have themselves cautioned us not to equate the acronym – or even the doctrines summarized by the acronym - with the Reformed theology itself. Boettner himself judiciously warned, early in the twentieth century against 'a too close identification of the Five Points and the Calvinist system'.<sup>36</sup> Palmer, in 1972, made essentially the same point when he began by writing, 'Calvinism does not have five points and neither is Calvin the author of the five points'.<sup>37</sup> Packer, while not endorsing the acronym, gave out similar cautions in 1959: 'It would not be correct simply to equate Calvinism with the five points', and 'the five points present Calvinistic soteriology in a negative and polemical form'.<sup>38</sup> Our failure to heed such cautions and our still-current tendency to revel in this acronym (however fine-tuned) may indicate that the Calvinism of our age has a vehement, belligerent streak in it. Earlier ages than our own were capable of distinguishing between a Calvinism that was sound and Calvinism that was vulgar, between a Calvinism that was sober-minded and one

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idea of limitation in the atonement, prior to 1932, see fn. 42 (below) where there is some indication that Spurgeon was familiar with this conception and dismissive of it.

<sup>36</sup> *Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 59.

<sup>37</sup> *The Five Points*, i.

<sup>38</sup> 'Introductory Essay' to Owen's *Death of Death* (1647), 5.

which was extravagant.<sup>39</sup> Spurgeon, for example, insisted that with regard to the hyper-Calvinists of his day, he ‘differed from them in what they do *not* believe’. He maintained that distinctions between distinguishable Calvinist emphases were necessary. Just as a navigational compass, in addition to having North, South, East and West also had ‘a Northeast and a Northwest’,<sup>40</sup> so there were expressions of Calvinism which had shifted from its true bearings. If such a readiness to make doctrinal distinctions has been lost, the modern Calvinist movement is the poorer for it.

Earlier defenders of Calvinism’s points were frequently embraceive, ready to go some distance toward meeting the concerns expressed in the views of objectors. This is nowhere so obvious as when older writers took up the always-controversial question of the extent of the atonement. The vast majority of older writers surveyed here preferred the language of ‘particular atonement’ or ‘particular redemption’ to the acronym’s suggestion of an atonement that was ‘limited’.<sup>41</sup> But more than this, it is evident that in keeping with Dordt’s original insistence that – as to the sheer value of Christ’s dying, his death was ‘abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world’<sup>42</sup> – older writers often took pains to spell out the senses in which there were *universal* benefits in that particular redemption won by Christ. John Edwards listed two such benefits and Thomas Ridgley three.<sup>43</sup> In the following century, Charles Hodge of Princeton established the same point in his *Systematic Theology* while Robert L. Dabney acknowledged it in his *Lectures in Theology*.<sup>44</sup> Spurgeon, for his

<sup>39</sup> Such distinctions about the Calvinism at the end of the eighteenth century were drawn by David Bogue and James Bennett, *History of Dissenters From the Revolution Under King William to the Year 1838* (London: 1839). II. 37 and Henry Moncrieff Wellwood, *Account of the Life and Writings of John Erskine, D.D.*, (Edinburgh, 1818), 380.

<sup>40</sup> *C.H. Spurgeon: The Early Years*, 173.

<sup>41</sup> I find it intriguing that Steele and Thomas, writing in 1963 – ostensibly to uphold the –L- of limited atonement *still* evince the strongest preference for the older language of particular redemption. This is a clear example of the way in which the venerated acronym had become a Procrustean formula by the 1960’s. See their *Five Points*, 38 ff. With the exception of Augustus Toplady, (cf. p. 7 *supra*) the literature produced by Calvinists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries consistently speaks of the atonement as ‘particular’ rather than ‘limited’.

<sup>42</sup> This is the actual language of the Canons of Dordt, Head II, article 3.

<sup>43</sup> Edwards, *Veritas Redux*, 383, 384; Ridgley, *Body of Divinity* I. 434.

<sup>44</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II. 558; Robert Dabney, *Lectures in Theology*, 527. This emphasis is not present, however, in John Murray’s *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955). In his fourth chapter, Murray stoutly defends the acceptability of the term ‘limited’

own part was adamant in resisting ‘some who think it necessary to their system of theology to limit the merit of the blood of Jesus; if my theological system needed such a limitation, I would cast it to the winds’.<sup>45</sup> There is no pretending here that ‘limited atonement’ was just another name for ‘particular redemption’. The latter view, but not the former, carried with it suggestions of adequacy and capaciousness – ideas which are both noble and capable of addressing the question of ‘room at the cross’. Where Calvinist writers today show no such embrasive interest in defining and defending their Calvinism, it may be an indication that they have accepted that they are now theologizing for an identifiable Calvinist ‘narrow way’, a Calvinism on the ‘margins’, rather than for the evangelical Protestant tradition as a whole. This represents a dramatic reversal, a self-imposed ‘ghettoization’ compared even to the nineteenth century. It is time to ask hard questions as to who led the way in this retreat. Is this ‘ghettoization’ an unacknowledged remnant of the fundamentalist era of the early twentieth century?

This leads to the related observation, that earlier Calvinist theologians believed that in upholding the points of Calvinism (described in broad-brush fashion) they were performing a service to the *whole* of evangelical Christianity rather than pursuing a mere ‘party’ interest. Thomas Haweis and Thomas Scott saw this presciently; their diocesan bishop either could not tell the difference or did not care to distinguish between his clergy of Wesleyan and Calvinist sympathy. He blamed them all for holding gloomy views of human nature, of discouraging human moral effort, of bordering on enthusiasm by holding to belief in a sensible calling to salvation in this life (as opposed to a baptismal regeneration) and teaching that believers might enjoy strong impressions of assurance of salvation. They answered him, as writers consciously standing in the stream of Dordt-style Calvinism in defense of what they perceived to belong to ‘our common Christianity’, i.e. Scriptural religion. One can certainly find the same stance in the nineteenth century Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, who claimed (however accurately) that he wrote in support of the views of evangelical Christianity as a whole, and was only enunciating ‘the church doctrine’.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, there is the striking fact that twentieth-century writing on behalf of TULIP has only very infrequently engaged with the actual Canons

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with respect to the atonement, while maintaining his firm belief in a free gospel offer.

<sup>45</sup> *C.H. Spurgeon: The Early Years*, 173.

<sup>46</sup> This feature of Hodge’s writing, so evident in his *Systematic Theology*, was highlighted by David Wells in an essay, ‘The Stout and Persistent Theology of Charles Hodge’ in *Christianity Today*, 18 (August 30, 1974), 10-12.

of Dordt of which the acronym purports to be a paraphrase or summary.<sup>47</sup> This meant, and means that writers have been implying the fidelity of the acronym as a rendering of Dordt's meaning without ever being pressed to demonstrate that this fidelity exists in fact. To call the paraphrasing of Dordt by TULIP a 'broad brush' approach, is arguably too kind!<sup>48</sup> Why has there been no inquiry as to whether there is actually a true correspondence between this alleged paraphrase of Dordt, and the actual intention of the Canons – widely available in English? We may well be overdue for a revisiting of the Canons of Dordt themselves - even to the point of quoting them, or making a fresh compressed summary of their actual contents.<sup>49</sup> And for those who labor in settings where such symbols as the Westminster Standards are still utilized – is it not past time for an articulating of the legacy of Dordt as these themes have come to be enfolded in the doctrinal articles and confessions of faith we *in fact* uphold? TULIP is not, verbatim, in those doctrinal articles – yet the theological legacy of Dordt is.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Welcome exceptions to this rule are found in John R. DeWitt, *What is the Reformed Faith?*, Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, and Richard Mouw, *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport*; the exception is rooted in their standing astride the two worlds of Dutch and English-speaking Calvinism, so that they both know Dordt and more popular expressions of Calvinism in the English-speaking world.

<sup>48</sup> Just how broad a brush was illustrated, for example, by the late Anthony Hoekema's indication that the terminology of 'Irresistible Grace', (The 'I' of the acronym, TULIP) far from encapsulating Dordt's intended emphasis, actually relays the protest of the Dutch Remonstrants *against* early seventeenth century Calvinism in a way dependent on Jesuit writers of that time. How is it possible that 'Irresistible', a term intended to besmirch and caricature the concept of a grace that eventually prevails over all opposition, has been taken up and championed by those it was meant to portray unfavorably? See Anthony Hoekema's *Saved By Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 104,105.

<sup>49</sup> The irony of this suggestion, however, is that the Canons of Dordt (alleged to be paraphrased in the acronym) actually have no confessional standing in the vast majority of churches where the acronym is advocated. To this extent, its use involves a kind of interpolation of doctrinal themes or emphases which may be no part of a particular church's articles of faith.

<sup>50</sup> So, for example Total Depravity is not in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* while a chapter, 'The Fall of Man' (embracing the intensiveness and extensiveness of sin) is. Limited Atonement is not in the *WCF* while a chapter, 'Of Christ the Mediator' (embracing in para. viii the application of redemption 'to all those for whom Christ purchased' it) is. Irresistible Grace, is not present, while 'Effectual Calling' forms a chapter which indicates that awakened sinners are enabled to 'come most freely, being made willing by his grace'.

## V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This survey began by remarking on the current evidences of the resurgence of Calvinism and its often-contested points. It was noted that evangelical Calvinists today tend to belong to one of two types ('sovereign grace' or 'apologetic'). It was maintained that whatever their differences, they were both more wedded to the TULIP formulation than is warranted by good historical or theological inquiry. We ought therefore to proceed with more skepticism towards TULIP as an alleged authentic exposition of Reformed theology than has characterized the Calvinist movement to date. And more of us should read Richard Mouw's *Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport* (Zondervan, 2004) which, apart from its unwarranted loyalty to the now-doubtful acronym and its very broad brush strokes,<sup>51</sup> can help us recover the 'big picture' that was more evident to many of our forbears than it has been to us, i.e. that everything of truly abiding value in Calvinism serves the interests of 'our common Christianity'.

## EXPOSITIONS OF THE POINTS OF CALVINISM TRACED SINCE 1900

<i>Author/Title/Year</i>	<i>TULIP used?</i>	<i>Comments?</i>
Mouw, Richard, <i>Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport</i> (2004)	Yes	An apologetic approach is taken. The rough edges of some of the points are removed by a generous method of exposition. The supposition that the points actually represent Dordt is not challenged.
Peterson, Robert & Michael Williams, <i>Why I am Not An Arminian</i> (2004)	No	This book provides exposition of critical differences separating Calvinist and Arminian positions. Not a defense of TULIP but an exploration of Predestination, Perseverance, Human Freedom, Sinful Inability, The Operation of Grace and the Design of the Atonement. Apologetic

<sup>51</sup> Illustrative of Mouw's pronounced embracive approach is his eighth chapter, 'The Generosity Option' in which he muses on the possibility of a pervasive Christian salvation embracing a far vaster proportion of the world's population than persons of the Calvinist persuasion have contemplated in recent times.



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Boice, James and Philip Ryken, <i>The Doctrines of Grace</i> (2002)	Yes	An Apologetic approach is taken. Total becomes Radical; Limited becomes Particular, Irresistible becomes Efficacious. Yet, the old supposition that these re-named points actually represent Dordt itself is maintained.
George, Timothy F., <i>Amazing Grace</i> (2002)	No	An Apologetic approach for persons not previously familiar with, or suspicious of Calvinist doctrines. A new acrostic is proposed: R (Radical Depravity), O (Overcoming Grace), S (Sovereign Election), E (Eternal Life), S (Singular or Particular Redemption).
Nicole, Roger, <i>Standing Forth</i> (2002)	Yes	An Apologetic approach. TULIP is said to be 'now quite traditional'. Total becomes Radical, Unconditional becomes Sovereign, Limited becomes Particular, Irresistible becomes Effectual. Limited is denounced as 'a complete misnomer'.
Sproul, R.C., <i>Grace Unknown</i> (1997)	Yes	An Apologetic approach. TULIP endorsed, then modified. Total becomes Radical; Unconditional becomes Sovereign; Limited becomes Purposeful; Irresistible becomes Effective; Perseverance become Preservation.
DeWitt, John R., <i>What is the Reformed Faith?</i> (1981)	No	Apologetic. The significance of the five points is rapidly passed over in favor of five other overarching concerns.
Custance, Arthur C., <i>The Sovereignty of Grace</i> (1979)	Yes	Sovereign grace emphasis. Here, the points of TULIP are given a very unflinching exposition across 140 pages. Yet evidently, on p. 83 the author makes plain that he had viewed the actual Canons of Dordt.
Palmer, Edwin, <i>Five Points of Calvinism</i> (1972)	Yes	Apologetic. Commences by distinguishing Total Depravity (which he affirms) from Absolute Depravity (which he affirms is the case only occasionally)

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<p>Seaton, Jack, <i>The Five Points of Calvinism</i> (1970)</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>Sovereign grace emphasis. Seaton promptly goes to work to clarify what Total Depravity does not mean, etc. Yet he accepts uncritically that TULIP is conveying the message of Dordt to us.</p>
<p>Steele and Thomas, <i>Five Points of Calvinism</i> (1963)</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>Sovereign Grace approach. The points are upheld according to the acronym, though Limited and Particular are used interchangeably. There is the appearance but only the appearance of a paraphrase of Dordt.</p>
<p>Packer, J. I., <i>Introductory Essay to Owen</i> (1959)</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>TULIP is named, but Packer does not really use this framework. He argues that this framework is deficient.</p>
<p>Warburton, Ben, <i>Calvinism</i> (1955)</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>Seems a more U.K. emphasis. Predestination, not Unconditional Election; Particular Redemption, not Limited Atonement; Invincible not Irresistible Grace etc. Reminiscent of 18 &amp; 19 century writers.</p>
<p>Boettner, Loraine, <i>Reformed Doctrine of Predestination</i> (1932)</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>TULIP is introduced for the first time known to the writer. Yet Boettner claims no originality in introducing them. It might be fairly inferred that he has found them already in circulation. He will be less nuanced when, in 1983, he reiterates the points of TULIP in his pamphlet, <i>The Reformed Faith</i>. Now, the cautions of 1932 that the Reformed faith is much larger than TULIP seem to have vanished.</p>
<p>Warfield, B.B., <i>Plan of Salvation</i> (1915) <i>Works</i> Vol. V (1929)</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>In his <i>Works</i> (V. 363) Warfield describes Dordt as reasserting the fundamental doctrines of 'absolute predestination, particular redemption, total depravity, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints'. Here we have three elements of TULIP. Is it possible that Warfield here unwittingly provided the origin from which Boettner (1932) has developed the scheme so familiar to us?</p>