

# Can I be a Calvinist and be Free Grace?

-Dr. Fred R. Lybrand

Honestly, I get this question a lot. Most Arminians aren't in our conversations among Free Grace advocates because of their conviction that one can lose his eternal life. Calvinists do affirm the security of the believer, so we are in the same basic conversation. In my book [Back to Faith](#) I take Calvinism to task, but only a bit. The confusion around Perseverance (is it that we persevere in works, persevere in faith, or that God perseveres in keeping us safely His children forever?) is the big issue I think some forms of Calvinism fumble over. On the other hand, there is a great debt of gratitude owed to Calvin and the Reformers in my own understanding and tradition. Am I Free Grace and a Calvinist?

## What Makes one a Calvinist?

What really makes one a 'Calvinist'? I don't think we've done a fair job defining this among ourselves, and as a result we have some of our number at times condemning all things Calvin. Most of the time we say being a Calvinist is all about the '5 Points'. In particular the notion is almost ubiquitous that if you believe in one point, then you must believe in all five points because it is a 'system'---so the argument goes. I don't believe it is a system, nor do I believe that one must accept all five points (even logically)...I'll prove it in a minute. Indeed, if I had to be labeled, I'd request that you consider me a **1.5 Arminian!**

The following chart is from the Moody Handbook of Theology (p. 490). It involves a little more than the 5 Points, but gets the issue in focus.

### CALVINISM AND ARMINIANISM CONTRASTED

Doctrine	Arminianism	Calvinism
Depravity	As a result of the Fall, man has inherited a corrupted nature. Prevenient grace has removed the guilt and condemnation of Adam's sin.	As a result of the Fall, man is totally depraved and dead in sin; he is unable to save himself. Because he is dead in sin, God must initiate salvation.

Imputation of Sin	God did not impute to the entire human race through Adam's sin, but all people inherit a corrupt nature as a result of Adam's fall.	Through Adam's transgression, sin was imputed—passed to the entire race so that all people are born in sin.
Election	God elected those whom He knew would believe of their own free will. Election is conditional, based on man's response in faith.	God unconditionally, from eternity past, elected some to be saved. Election is not based on man's future response.
Atonement of Christ	Christ died for the entire human race, making all mankind saveable. His death is effective only in those who believe.	God determined that Christ would die for all those whom God elected. Since Christ did not die for everyone but only for those who were elected to be saved, His death is completely successful.
Grace	Through prevenient or preparatory grace, which is given to all people, man is able to cooperate with God and respond to Him in salvation. Prevenient grace reverses the effects of Adam's sin.	Common grace is extended to all mankind but is insufficient to save anyone. Through irresistible grace God drew to Himself those whom He had elected, making them willing to respond.
Will of Man	Prevenient grace is given to all people and is exercised on the entire person, giving man a free will.	Depravity extends to all of man, including his will. Without irresistible grace man's will remains bound, unable to respond to God on its own ability.
Perseverance	Believers may turn from grace and lose their salvation.	Believers will persevere in the faith. Believers are secure in their salvation; none will be lost.
Sovereignty of God	God limits His control in accordance with man's freedom and response. His decrees are related to His foreknowledge of what man's response will be.	God's sovereignty is absolute and unconditional. He has determined all things according to the good pleasure of His will. His foreknowledge originates in advanced planning, not in advanced information.

There is a good bit of discussion out there about the 'perseverance point'---whether it is about persevering in good works, persevering in faith (as the Moody Handbook claims), or God persevering in keeping one saved (preservation of the saints). How many of us have read the Canons of Dort of late? I have read the Canons of Dort over and over recently, and I can tell you that:

1. All three types of 'perseverance' are mentioned in the Canons of Dort
2. The focus of the point concerning perseverance **IS** the eternal security of the believer (and his assurance).

I know this all sounds a little stuffy and theological, but George Bernard Shaw weighs in here for us:

***No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says: He is always convinced that it says what he means.***

The Bible is what matters not any particular theological system. Theological systems are great when they match the Word because they help us make sense, remember, and expand what we observe. But, why is Dort the definition of Calvinism? Personally, I think it just turns out to be a rhetorical stronghold.

Here are a few facts to consider:

1. The Canons of Dort was a RESPONSE to the Five Articles of the Remonstrance
2. It was a localized debate in Holland (hence TULIP ?)
3. It was authored 55 years after Calvin's death
4. There are other statements like Heidelberg and Westminster, and many other variations of Calvinism (please read Spurgeon & Hyper-Calvinism by Iain H. Murray).

What is a Calvinist? In the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (ed. Walter Elwell), Calvinism is defined by the three tenants of

- Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone)
- Soli Deo gloria (God's glory alone)
- Sola fidei (Faith alone)

The EDT article goes on to admit the variation and development of theological thought in Calvinism. It is clearly the Reformed faith, but Covenant-Reformed like Covenant-Calvinism, is a branch or variation of Calvinism. In our day, a few popular leaders have taken the rhetorical road of claiming that they alone are the true Calvinists...and...if you ain't a 5 Pointer, you ain't a real Calvinist (B.B. Warfield would call non-5 pointers 'bad' Calvinists;

others would call them 'inconsistent' Calvinists).

So why all the fuss? The reason is pretty simple--- Free Grace folks have gotten immersed in the frayed rhetoric. The concern is that we can inadvertently come across as 'banishing' those who belong with us. The fears we have are not based on the real nature of things. Yes, you can be a Calvinist and be a Free Grace advocate (I think I'm one)! As to being a semi-Arminian or 5-Point-Covenant-Reformed person and being Free Grace, well that's a different article. If you are a Hyper-Calvinist or a Hyper-Arminian, then you won't want to join with us.

It is the Covenant of the FGA that guides our membership. Quite frankly (as Dr. Zuck wrote me) it is a very well-crafted statement of our basic view. There is nothing in it that excludes a person who has Calvinistic convictions.

### **How to Kill the Argument**

I'd like to finally kill the argument --- 'if you buy one point you must buy all 5' --- that seems to be accepted as a given in many circles. I could walk through the logic of it and display why the nature of the atonement and eternal security are not necessarily what follows from the other points; but I can do something better. I can show you how almost no Free Grace person really believes that the 5 Points of Calvinism lead to the misunderstanding of Lordship Salvation. That is actually the real issue. I'll lay it out in a sequence:

1. If the 5 points of Calvinism (Canons of Dort) are a system and must be believed together
2. Then the 5 points of Arminianism (Remonstrance) are a system and must be believed together as well. This is particularly true because the Canons of Dort was developed as a REACTION TO the Remonstrance.
3. So, if one believes one point of Arminiansim, then he must believe all 5 points.
4. Many Free Grace advocates affirm Unlimited Atonement (Christ died for all and not just for the elect)
5. Therefore, they (#4) must also believe in falling from grace (losing one's salvation / eternal life) as one of the points of Arminianism.

Said differently, I know lots of Free Grace folks who believe in Unlimited Atonement AND who believe in eternal security. They are, in effect, **1 Point Arminians** (at least). The claimed logical connection is bogus. All systems are 'logical'---but there are additional aspects to logic, such as the issue of whether or not a premise is true or whether the chain of logic really follows.

Of course you can be a Calvinist and be Free Grace, but certain kinds of Calvinists are definitely not Free grace. Of course you can be basically Arminian and be Free Grace (but you must reject the idea of 'losing your salvation').

Our views and our systems are always struggling---we are trying to answer the most questions while raising the fewest problems. To be Free Grace, the issue isn't about our theological

systems as much as it is THE GOSPEL. Some systems make keeping the gospel clear an easy thing, while others make it quite a challenge.

Here is the basic FGA Covenant...which isn't about Calvin or Arminius, but rather it is about the word of grace:

As members of the Evangelical Tradition, we affirm the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the inspired Word of God and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. Furthermore, God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory. As members of this tradition, we are concerned about the clear understanding, presentation, and advancement of the Gospel of God's Free Grace.

We affirm the following:

1. The Grace of God in justification is an unconditional free gift.
2. The sole means of receiving the free gift of eternal life is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose substitutionary death on the cross fully satisfied the requirement for our justification.
3. Faith is a personal response, apart from our works, whereby we are persuaded that the finished work of Jesus Christ has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life.
4. Justification is the act of God to declare us righteous when we believe in Jesus Christ alone.
5. Assurance of justification is the birthright of every believer from the moment of faith in Jesus Christ, and is founded upon the testimony of God in His written Word.
6. Spiritual growth, which is distinct from justification, is God's expectation for every believer; this growth, however, is not necessarily manifested uniformly in every believer.
7. The Gospel of Grace should always be presented with such clarity and simplicity that no impression is left that justification requires any step, response, or action in addition to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **FGA Covenant:**

*In agreement with these affirmations, we covenant to work together graciously and enthusiastically to advance this Gospel of Grace, and to communicate with a positive and gracious tone toward all others, both inside and outside the Free Grace Alliance.*

As an added point, John Nelson Darby, the 'father' of dispensational theology was a proponent of many Calvinistic beliefs...

Darby defended Calvinist doctrines when they came under attack from within the Church in which he once served. His biographer Goddard states, "Darby

indicates his approval of the doctrine of the Anglican Church as expressed in Article XVII of the Thirty-Nine Articles" on the subject of election and predestination. Darby said:

"For my own part, I soberly think Article XVII to be as wise, perhaps I might say the wisest and best condensed human statement of the view it contains that I am acquainted with. I am fully content to take it in its literal and grammatical sense. I believe that predestination to life is the eternal purpose of God, by which, before the foundations of the world were laid, He firmly decreed, by His counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and destruction those whom He had chosen in Christ out of the human race, and to bring them, through Christ, as vessels made to honour, to eternal salvation."

[[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Nelson\\_Darby](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Nelson_Darby)]

Millard J. Erickson in his Christian Theology (Volume II, p. 835), as he analyzes the extent of the Atonement, weighs in on the reality of Calvinism subject to modification (or moderation)---

*The view that we are adopting here should not be construed as Arminianism. It is rather the most moderate form of Calvinism or; as some would term it, a modification of Calvinism.*

Let's keep perspective and united with all who affirm faith alone in Christ alone according to our FGA Covenant as a reflection of God's Word. Can you be a Calvinist and be Free Grace? Of course, but labels often complicate the conversation. Yet, denying one's clear Arminian or Calvinistic bent tends to confuse things all the more; no matter our wish, much of the conversation has been had for eons and we remain in the flow of it.

Pick your label or deny your label; but do you affirm faith alone in Christ alone--- communicating this alone? Then join us in the good fight.

Grace and Truth,

Fred Lybrand  
Former FGA President (2008/2009)  
[www.fredlybrand.org](http://www.fredlybrand.org)  
[www.backtofaith.com](http://www.backtofaith.com)