

# Backgrounds of American Literary Thought

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could be finally convinced by such proofs. However, if we remember that according to Calvin all men were hopelessly lost through the fall of Adam and that it is a sign of God's love that he effected a plan by which anyone at all might be saved, we may perhaps understand that for the Genevan reformer, and for his followers for generations after, this doctrine was a source of genuine comfort. For the man convinced that the grace of God had actually entered his life, it was a source of moral and spiritual power such as to enable him to defy all the forces of Church and State ranged against him.

**A too-simple, but convenient summary of Calvinist theology is contained in the famous Five Points which are given below.**

1. **Total depravity.** This asserts the sinfulness of man through the fall of Adam, and the utter inability of man to work out his own salvation. God is all; man is nothing, and is the source of all evil. God meant all things to be in harmony; man, by his sinful nature, creates disharmony, and deserves nothing but to be cast away.
2. **Unconditional election.** God, under no obligation to save anyone, saves, or "elects" whom he will, with no reference to faith or good works. Since all things are present in the mind of God at once, He knows beforehand who will be saved; and thus election or reprobation is predestined. But no man can share in this foreknowledge, and all must assent to the Divine Will.
3. **Limited atonement.** Christ did not die for all, but only for those who are to be saved. If He had not died on the cross, none could be saved; and thus we have another evidence of God's love toward mankind.
4. **Irresistible grace.** God's grace is freely given, and can neither be earned nor refused. Grace is defined as the saving and transfiguring power of God, offering newness of life, forgiveness of sins, the power to resist temptation, and a wonderful peace of mind and heart. It is Augustine's concept of the "restless soul having found rest in God," and is akin to Luther's insistence on a sense of spiritual union with Christ as the prime requisite to salvation.

5. **Perseverance of the Saints.** Those whom God has chosen have thenceforth full power to do the will of God, and to live uprightly to the end. It is the logical and necessary conclusion to the absolute Sovereignty of God. If man could later reject the gift of grace after having once felt its power in his life, he would be asserting his power over that of God, and in Calvinism this is impossible.

Thus we see the cardinal points of Calvin's theology. God is all-powerful. His hand is ever at work in the world, and He is the First Cause of everything that happens in the world. His true nature is incomprehensible to man, and yet He left many clues and hints in His own holy word, the Bible, and it is the duty of man to search the Old and New Testaments for a more exact knowledge of the will of God toward man, as interpreted by competent theologians. Daily life is to be lived in strict conformity to the rules and regulations to be found in the Bible, and all that man does, even to the conduct of routine business affairs, is to be done with the utmost intensity and zeal to the greater glory of God.

The foregoing is a fair example of the closely knit fabric of reasoning that was Calvinism. Since medieval habits of mind were still strong in Calvin's day, and since few men were prepared to maintain that God's power is in any way limited, one had only to accept the two major premises of God's omnipotence and man's depravity (and there seemed to be plenty of evidence for the latter) and the rest of the system was inescapable. Calvinism differed from the Catholicism of the sixteenth century largely in its stark simplicity, and in its refusal to qualify or gloss over in any way man's helplessness and depravity as compared with his awful Sovereign. Man existed only to glorify God in thought, word, and deed, and it was his highest duty to do so even though he might be predestined to reprobation like the veriest sinner of the flock. The Calvinist truly "prepared for the best, but expected the worst," and there has hardly been a more grimly