

# Calvin's comeback? The irresistible Reformer: The irresistible Reformer

by [J. Todd Billings](#) in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue

According to a *Time* magazine article earlier this year, the “New Calvinism” is one of “ten ideas changing the world right now” (March 23). The New Calvinists cited include megachurch pastor and author John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis; R. Albert Mohler Jr., head of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, who has remade the seminary according to a Calvinist agenda; and raw, hip pastor-author Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. The New Calvinism is found in the doctrinal commentary on Web sites like *Between Two Worlds*, in the notes to the ESV (English Standard Version) Study Bible (*World Magazine’s* 2009 Book of the Year) and in the popular “Passion” conferences featuring the tunes of the David Crowder Band. The New Calvinism movement has reclaimed Puritans like John Owen and Jonathan Edwards. Indeed, in New Calvinist circles, you may even spot “Jonathan Edwards Is My Homeboy” T-shirts.

Moreover, the New Calvinism displays considerable diversity. African-American rapper Curtis “Voice” Allen is known for his distinctively Calvinist lyrics (“I been exposed to bright lights, the doctrines of grace, I’m elected, imputed perfected . . . Cuz nothing can stop his plan, and as far as the east is from the west more than time zones, man”). The New Calvinists admire not only white Puritans but “black Puritan” voices like Lemuel Haynes and Anthony Carter, who gives an African-American take on the themes of the New Calvinism in *On Being Black and Reformed*.

According to *Time*, the New Calvinism is “complete with an utterly sovereign and micromanaging deity, sinful and puny humanity, and the combination’s logical consequence, predestination: the belief that before time’s dawn, God decided who he would save (or not), unaffected by any subsequent human action or decision.” The *New York Times Magazine* (January 6) summarized the theology of Mark Driscoll this way: “You are not captain of your soul or master of your fate but a depraved worm whose hard work and good deeds will get you nowhere, because God marked you for heaven or condemned you to hell before the beginning of time.”

These media accounts show more than a little condescension, but they do identify a central theme of the new movement: a theology in which divine predestination and divine sovereignty are at the center. The New Calvinists' emphasis on a God-centered gospel provides an alternative to the many forms of American religion that are preoccupied with the self. Instead, the New Calvinists delight in affirming God's ultimate power in salvation and in God's providential work.

These theological claims are not just for casual discussion. At Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Mohler introduced a doctrinal statement—which professors are required to sign—that includes this declaration: “Election is God’s eternal choice of some persons unto everlasting life—not because of foreseen merit in them, but of His mere mercy in Christ—in consequence of which choice they are called, justified and glorified.” The statement is based on a historic Reformed Baptist document, the Second London Confession of 1689.

But this assertion of Calvinism has generated resistance within the Southern Baptist Convention. Frank Page, president of the SBC from 2006 to 2008, along with many other SBC leaders thinks the predestinarian logic of Calvinism undercuts the motive and energy for evangelistic mission. Many Southern Baptists also question the historical claim that Reformed theology is a central part of Baptist identity.

In his book *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists*, Collin Hansen presents the doctrines of predestination and sovereignty as central to the movement. The most common way these doctrines are summarized in New Calvinist circles, Hansen found, is with the acronym TULIP. In the TULIP formula:

T stands for Total Depravity: Sinners are totally unable to please God.

U stands for Unconditional Election: From eternity, God elects some for salvation, an election that does not depend upon a person's behavior or upon foreknowledge of the person's faith or obedience.

L stands for Limited Atonement: Christ's atoning work on the cross is intended only for the elect.

I stands for Irresistible Grace: Humans who come to faith do not synergistically act in cooperation with the Holy Spirit; rather, the Spirit overcomes human resistance.

P stands for Perseverance of the Saints: the elect remain steadfast in their faith and do not fall away.

TULIP provides an easy-to-remember account of a fairly substantial set of theological ideas focusing upon God's election and sovereignty. For Reformed apologists in New Calvinist circles, TULIP provides an easy litmus test for a Reformed and Calvinist theology. In these conversations, only if one is a "five-point Calvinist" is one truly Reformed.

For the non-Reformed, TULIP provides a wonderfully convenient box into which Reformed theology can be placed—and criticized. Thus, when Frank Page wanted to counter New Calvinist theology, he wrote a book titled *Trouble with the TULIP*. Even when the TULIP acronym is not explicitly evoked, traces of the TULIP definition can be seen in accounts that identify the Reformed tradition simply by its views on predestination or God's sovereignty.

But TULIP does not provide an adequate or even accurate distillation of Reformed theology. TULIP is a relatively recent acronym used to summarize a much older theological document—a document that was itself never intended as a summary of Reformed theology. TULIP was developed in the 20th-century English-speaking world to describe the five points made in a document known as the Canons (or "standard") of Dort. Written at a gathering of church leaders in the Netherlands in 1618–1619, the canons do not even attempt to give a broad statement of Reformed belief. Instead, the document is organized as a response to the five points presented by followers of theologian Jacob Arminius in a document called the Remonstrance, which addressed a cluster of issues related to predestination, the Spirit and the assurance of salvation. It was the Remonstrants who set the agenda for the topics cited in the five points.

In this controversy, the Dutch Reformed Church had no need for a general statement of Reformed doctrine; it already possessed one in the Belgic Confession of 1561. This confession gave a wide-ranging exposition of Reformed teaching, including the sacraments, the Trinity, the nature of the church and state, and the person and work of Christ. Dort sought not to rewrite the Belgic Confession but to supplement it, addressing controversies over predestination and related issues. Dort functioned as an extended footnote to the main Reformed confession.

Second, the TULIP doctrines do not provide an accurate summary of Dort itself. While acronyms work well as memory aids, in this case the acronym is misleading on key points within the canons themselves. For example, “total depravity,” a phrase not found in the canons, sounds like an expression of a misanthropic view of humanity—the view that all people are as wicked as they could possibly be. That is not the case with Dort. Dort affirms that all people bear the image of God, and early Reformed thinkers frequently claimed that even “pagan” thought and culture are to be valued (with discernment) as containing truth from God. Dort’s claim on this point is that fallen humanity cannot enter back into communion with God apart from the effectual work of the Spirit. Underlying this assertion is a vision of humans created as “spiritual” beings in communion with God—a communion restored through Christ. Dort’s teaching on human sin is not misanthropic, but an attempt to name the Spirit’s work to “revive and heal” human beings, graciously overcoming human rebellion in a way “at once pleasing and powerful,” in the words of the canons.

Other points of TULIP are similarly misleading. “Limited atonement” is probably the most egregious misstatement, for Dort does not use either the word *limited* or the word *atonement*. The phrase implies that Christ’s death was insufficient for the whole world—a position that Dort explicitly rejects. “Irresistible grace” sounds like a coercive force, rather than a reference to the Spirit-empowered liberation from sin.

TULIP perpetuates a basic misunderstanding about the Reformed tradition: that predestination is the center of Reformed theology from which all else flows. Predestination is indeed important in the Reformed tradition. The Bible speaks about predestination, and the teachings of Calvin and the Synod of Dort seek to use this doctrine in a pastoral way to encourage humility and gratitude to God for salvation. But predestination is one among many teachings that rise and fall on the basis of scriptural exegesis in the Reformed tradition. The New Calvinists have served to further make Calvinism synonymous with a small portion of Reformed teaching.

When Reformed identity is summarized by TULIP, some key elements of the Reformed tradition are lost or distorted.

For example: *Reformed theology operates with a catholic and biblical vision*. Unlike some Protestants—including some of the New Calvinists—the classical Reformed tradition avoids acting as if the Spirit abandoned the church between the first and the 20th centuries. It believes that the Spirit has been active in the church throughout its history. For the first two centuries of the Reformed tradition in

particular, its theologians read extensively from the church fathers and medieval theologians, seeking to discern the Spirit's work in the past. Major portions of the Reformed confessions draw upon the patristic and medieval Christian teachings on the attributes of God, Christology and the Trinity. On topics like these, the Reformed tradition is catholic.

For the larger Reformed tradition, appropriating the Spirit's work in the past is not just a task for academic theologians. John Calvin sought to bring the sermons of John Chrysostom to the level of the people by seeking to have them translated into French. In the 19th century, the first major project for translating the church fathers into English (in 38 volumes) was edited by a Reformed scholar, Philip Schaff. Like the contemporary Ancient-Future movement and like parts of the Emergent church, the Reformed tradition is profoundly interested in recovering the wisdom of ancient teachings and practices for today's community of faith.

But how, amidst the great variety of theology and practice in the church's past, are we to distinguish the Spirit's work from error? To this question the Reformed tradition answers: on the basis of the Bible. Theological traditions do not constitute the final authority, but provide a means of moving deeper into a biblical reality.

*The Reformed tradition has a sacramental vision.* The New Calvinists tend to neglect a central feature of the Reformed faith: the important place given to the sacraments as divine instruments of transformation, presenting Jesus Christ himself to us as a gift, by the Spirit's power. For Calvin and the early Reformed tradition, doctrines like election were combined with a strong sense that Jesus Christ himself is the mirror of election. Believers should look not to themselves to find assurance of election, but to Jesus Christ. In this context, the sensible, bodily signs and seals of baptism and the Lord's Supper provide assurance of an intimate union with Christ. Christ alone is the believer's righteousness, the ground for being chosen by God.

Torn from this sacramental context, the doctrines of election and assurance take on a different character. In a nonsacramental setting, election can quickly become a matter of subjective soul-searching or philosophical speculation about God's decision made before the foundation of the world. The sacraments provide material assurance of God's abiding love in uniting believers to Christ by the Spirit. Without a sacramental vision, the doctrine of election can produce anxiety rather than trust.

*The Reformed tradition has a kingdom-sized vision of God's work.* When it comes to seeing the ways in which God is active in the world, the Reformed tradition says, "Think big." A Reformed view of the church avoids seeing it as a colony separated from society, or as the particular aspect of society that relates to "being religious." The church is the community shaped by God through Word and sacrament to bear witness to Christ's kingdom.

This community exists in the world and has eyes for God's kingdom as it shows up in hospitals, homes, schools and nature preserves. Some call this emphasis the "cultural mandate" in the Reformed tradition—a mandate not to "take back" American culture through the formation of a Christian subculture, but to send a people formed by Word and sacrament to be salt and light in government, the arts, education and all areas of society. The Reformed tradition provides an alternative both to cultural triumphalism and cultural disengagement. Living ever deeper in their God-given identity in Christ, Christians are to act as agents of cultural transformation without collapsing their calling into uncritical advocacy of a particular cultural-political movement.

The New Calvinists, with their God-centered message and their focus on dogmatic theology, make a robust contribution to contemporary ecclesial theological conversation. But they tend to obscure the fact that the Reformed tradition has a deeply catholic heritage, a Christ-centered sacramental practice and a wide-lens, kingdom vision for the Christian's vocation in the world. The New Calvinists pick the TULIP from the Reformed field, overlooking the other flowers. There is much besides the TULIP in this spacious field that has grown from the seed of God's word.