

TULIPs for the tolerant

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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So, the Internets are not friendly to Calvinists. And I get it. There are some in my Reformed tradition who would hardly want to acknowledge me as part of their theological tree.

Yet, when Zack Hunt pits [Rachel Held Evans against every Calvinist dude on the Internet](#) or people look to John Piper as the mouthpiece of the entire Reformed movement, I want to say, "Wait! There are a couple million of us who have roots in this movement that go back farther than 1987 and our understandings have moved us to great liberation!"

Neo-Calvinists are all the rage, but there are many of us who don't fit that mold. We are the faith of [Frances Grimke](#), [Maggie Kuhn](#), and [Mr. Rogers](#). We have wonderful [feminist theologians](#). We have theologians who think deeply about [marriage equality](#).

But our ultra-conservative rep continues. A dear friend recently wrote that she was learning about TULIP in seminary and she was horrified. She didn't understand how I could believe all that. TULIP was constructed after Calvin. It's a shorthand that makes the rich history of the Reformed movement palpable in a 50-minute seminary class. Though paltry, TULIP is what most people grasp, so I'll let you know how I understand it. I may not be able to wrestle the Calvinist microphone from the Baby Boomer, neo-Calvinists who have captured it, but at least I might be able to make some sense out of it for people who automatically equate Calvin and conservative.

T is for total depravity. Now, I can't imagine looking at my beautiful daughter and calling her "totally depraved." It's a dour thought. We are made in the image of God. And we are *good*.

Totality refers to every part, not a percentage. In other words, every part of me has some sort of tendency to be greedy or selfish. Ninety-nine percent of a person might be good, but there is always the 1% that's a bit shady.

I may want to give a generous gift, but I want the brass plaque commemorating my benevolence. I may want to serve a person who is experiencing homelessness a hot meal, but I get annoyed if he doesn't say "thank you." I am always fighting some sort of -ism that lurks in my thinking space.

As a product of my "everyone's a winner" culture, I had the worst time with this one (and still do). But over time, I've found that it's helpful for progressives to resist getting trapped in those utopian ideals, where we imagine that everyone has perfect motivations and intentions. Or that WE can create some sort of church or movement that won't be like former generations. We can't. Calvinists always understand that we need a check on power. Every institution, culture, system and group has the tendency for wrongdoing. The shirt we wear might have been made in a sweat shop, the car that we drive hurts the environment, or the fruit we consume was harvested by ill-treated workers. **We are always striving for liberation and peace, because we know we always need it.**

U is for unconditional election. God does the choosing, and it's unconditional. Salvation comes from God and God alone. It's not based on behavior or action. We might want to dictate who sits next to us in the pews. We're always drawing lines of who is in and who is out, according to our hot prejudice at the moment—gender, race, sexual orientation, political preference, or whatever. But we don't choose. God does.

L is for limited atonement. Jesus died for the elect. We could have a long theological discussion about all five of those words, but let's just say that there are many Calvinists who believe that all are elect. Some people read Karl Barth in that way.

Is this what Calvin intended? No. (There was that horrifying business of Servitus, after all.) But, that's the beauty of being reformed, and always reforming. We can grow into a different understanding of whom God elects. And we always go back to the U. God chooses, and we don't. Who are we to put limits on God?

I is for irresistible grace. Irresistible grace allowed me to rest in security that God loves me, no matter what I do. Even if I wrestle and doubt God, God's grace is irresistible. Like a mother who will not allow the feeble rejections of her teenaged daughter stop that maternal love. Except that God's grace is much, much more irresistible.

P is for perseverance of the saints. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. You cannot lose your salvation.

I grew up always worried that I was going to lose God's favor. I was born-again again at every chance I got. At every altar call, I uttered the sinner's prayer, because I believed it was up me and my actions. I wanted to get it right. I was anxious that I would sin, get hit by a bus, and go to hell. God's grace was that tenuous in my mind.

The beauty of Calvinism was that salvation begins with God, and does not depend on our feeble attempts to initiate it, earn it, or to lose it. And when we can live into that reality, understanding it for ourselves as well as others, it's extremely liberating.

This article was corrected on April 21, 2014.