

DOCTRINES OF GRACE

For we are the true circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.

— Philippians 3:3

The so-called “doctrines of grace” are shorthand for five Bible teachings that clarify the nature of God’s grace to us in Jesus Christ. When we first discover God’s grace, it amazes us and fills us with “joy inexpressible and full of glory.” Soon hardships, ongoing struggles with sin, and the busyness of life challenge that joy. Our exultation fades. What we must do is to go deeper into the mines of God’s grace and see more of the treasures God has given us in Christ.

Does salvation ultimately depend on God or me? Did Christ merely make it *possible* for me to be saved (providing I do my part), or did Christ *actually* save me? Am I saved by Christ or by my decision for Christ? If it all depends on my decision, can I change my mind later and fall from grace, or am I forever in Christ’s hands? Does my eternal security depend on me?

These are some of the questions that were raised in the 16th century by the teachings of a man named Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). Arminius’s followers developed five articles to summarize his teachings:

1. Human ability. Humans are only able to choose whether to trust Christ with God’s help. All people receive this help from God, but God leaves it to them to choose.
2. Conditional election. Before creation, God chose to save those whom He foresaw would choose Christ.
3. Universal atonement. Christ died for everyone, and God gives each person the choice whether or not to accept Christ’s sacrifice for forgiveness. Only those who choose to believe in Christ are forgiven.
4. Resistible grace. The Spirit speaks to every heart, urging him or her to trust Christ, but humans are able to resist the Holy Spirit and say no.
5. Tentative grace. Each Christian can later reject Christ and lose their salvation.

These teachings raised serious concerns. According to this view, salvation depends ultimately on human decision, which in effect makes humans their own saviors. Everything depends on the decision people make with the help God has provided them. There is no eternal security, since people can always change their minds later.

A council was convened to respond to Arminius’s teachings. It was called the Synod of Dort (1618-1619). Those at the Synod drafted a theological statement called the *Canons of Dort*, whose teachings were later summarized by the acrostic “TULIP,” which stands for Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. These terms are not ideal. While they are easy to remember using the acronym TULIP, they are poorly worded and easily misunderstood. For instance, many people prefer the term “radical depravity” to “total depravity,” and “definite atonement” to “limited atonement.” We encourage you to return to the sidebar and read through the doctrines of grace in order to exult once again over God’s incredible grace to us in Christ.