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WHAT SHOULD SOUTHERN BAPTIST DO WITH CALVINIST?

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The issue of Calvinism has been embedded in Southern Baptist history since its beginning. Most people identify John Smyth as one of the earliest Baptists, who was a strong advocate of adult believer's baptism and in 1609 re-baptized himself and others. This became the first outward emergence of the English Baptist church. Smyth introduced an open view of God's grace into Baptist's teaching. In other words, God's grace is for everyone, not just for predestined individuals. By 1640 approximately fifteen Baptist churches existed in England. These were referred to as General Baptists, meaning they adhered to the belief that Christ's atonement was generally made for all men and not limited to a predetermined elected few. Those who thought redemption was limited to a chosen few were called Particular Baptists because

¹I was reached for Christ through Eastern Heights Presbyterian Church in Savannah GA. An evangelistic Sunday school teacher took me to Sunday school faithfully and because of him and my mother, I had perfect attendance for fourteen years. In that Sunday school I memorized the children's Westminster catechism, and joined the church on Easter Sunday of 1944, along with twelve of my friends. I could answer all of the questions for membership in my head, but in my heart I knew I was lost. I accepted Christ at a revival meeting in Bonnabella Presbyterian Church (a suburb of Savannah, GA) when a Southern Baptist evangelist, Joel Ortendahl preached the gospel and I realized I was not born again. I received Christ at approximately 11:15 p.m. July 25, 1950, praying by my bed at home. I entered Columbia (SC) Bible College in September 1950 and began studying for the ministry. Later in that school year I was taken under care of the Savannah Presbytery, Southern Presbyterian Church (USA). In my sophomore year at age nineteen I began pastoring Westminster Presbyterian Church of Savannah, GA for approximately one year. During my years at an interdenominational college I argued frequently with my Southern Baptist and Pentecostal friends the five points of Calvinism, vehemently defending what I thought was their biblical nature. I was a committed Calvinist and a committed amillennialist. But I didn't preach like a Presbyterian in my church. I preached like a Baptist, I preached passionately begging people to come to the altar, where I led them to Jesus Christ. However, as a twenty year old part-time preacher, Westminster Presbyterian Church led the Savannah Presbytery in baptisms (sprinkling) in 1952-53. Because Columbia Bible College was not accredited, I transferred to Northwestern College, Minneapolis, MN that had been connected with First Baptist Church, and the great Baptist leader Dr. William B. Riley. I loved the evangelistic fervor that I got from Northwestern College (Billy Graham had just resigned as president). While there I read two books that forever changed my theology: *The Dawn of World Redemption*, and *The Triumph of the Crucified*, both by Erich Sauer (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951, 1952). These two books surveyed the entire Bible and convinced me that God did not have one covenant stretching over both testaments, and a careful study of the Word of God convinced me that reformed theology did not have a Biblical basis. These books convinced me to become a Premillennialist. A careful reading of these books would convince anyone that God has a new dispensation beginning with Jesus Christ; and the symbols of the new dispensation were water baptism and communion (the cup and bread celebrating the death of our Lord and water baptism).

they taught Jesus died for particular individuals, not everyone. So from the beginning the issue of Calvinism has been an issue among Baptists.²

In the last twenty-five years Southern Baptists have fought the battle of perceived liberalism within its ranks and bureaucracy, and most would agree that the fundamentalists have won that battle. Beginning with the election of Adrian Rogers in 1979, one self-identified fundamentalist after another has become president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and in turn they have controlled the nomination and election process of the various boards and seminaries. In due time, boards mandated that liberal leaning individuals were not nominated to positions, and fundamentalists turned the various boards and committees toward fundamentalism. Now, what's the next possible battle?

Some feel the next battle in the Southern Baptist Convention is the intrusive practice of Pentecostal sign gifts. Others feel the issue is the growing influence of extreme rock driven praise worship music that's gone beyond acceptable praise worship. Still others feel the influence of the emergent church, both with its new theology and methodology is an influence to be shunned.³

² Leon McBeth in his historic encyclopedia, The Baptist Heritage Broadman Press, 1987 gives several incidences of Calvinism in the history of Southern Baptist. He gives lengthy discussions of the English Particular Baptist in the 17th and 18th century, and their decline (p. 152-154, 171-178). He tells of the Primitive Baptist, or "Hardshell Baptist" including other small sectarian movements, i.e. the "Absoluters" (p. 720), the "Old Liners" (p. 720), the "Progressive" (p. 720) and the "Two Seeds in the Spirit" (p. 720). He describes many smaller attempts of churches and associations to revive Calvinism such as "Sovereign Grace Bible Conference" (p. 771) and "The Banner of Truth" (p. 771-772), "The Sword and Trowel" (p. 773) and the paper The Baptist Reformation Review (p. 773). We are indebted to McBeth for documenting the futility of so many Calvinistic attempts to influence the Southern Baptist Convention.

³ The emergent church has its own theology and church methodology and its foundation is contrary to the New Testament. The dominant doctrine of the emergent church concerns is the conversion of the heathen. They believe that those who have never heard of Christ, but sincerely believe in the God of heaven and attempt to follow Him will be given entrance into heaven. Many quote the verse "And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring," (John 10:16). However, they wrongly interpret that verse.

However, there are others who see the intrusive influence of five point Calvinism as an unacceptable expression of normal Southern Baptist life and ministry.⁴ On November 27, 2007 the Baptist Press stated, “Recent grads three times more likely to be Calvinists.”⁵ The press release goes on to quote a LifeWay study that was combined with an earlier 2007 NAMB study that determined 29 percent of recent SBC seminary graduates indicated they were Calvinists. This does not mean that one-third of all Southern Baptist pastors are Calvinists, only recent graduates. The alarmists however, would warn that eventually the Calvinists will take over the convention if the seminaries continue to indoctrinate graduates with Calvinist leanings.

Should people be upset at this trend? The research indicated that “churches pastored by Calvinists tend to have smaller attendance and typically baptize fewer persons each year.”⁶ While the study suggested that many Calvinists have the same statistics as non-Calvinistic Southern Baptists, it also asserted that the growth of Calvinism is not a threat. However, the study did not differentiate between five point Calvinism, and Southern Baptist pastors who have identified themselves as Calvinistic. This paper does not address all Calvinists, but those who march under the five points flag.

The basic issue concerns how Southern Baptists should react to five point Calvinism. Should or should not Southern Baptists attempt to purge itself of five point Calvinists? The

⁴ A five point Calvinist believes in the following acrostic i.e. TULIP. T – Total depravity, U – Unconditional election, L – Limited atonement, I – Irresistible grace, P – Perseverance of the saints. I’ve taught systematic theology since 1958 and have come to the conclusion that I disagree with all of the definitions of the above term usually given by Calvinists. Whereas I might agree with some variation of their definitions, I often have said, “I believe in all five points of TULIP, if I can define the terms.” The problem is humans take Bible words and impose their human definitions on them. That’s one of the major problems with five point enthusiasts; they impose their human definitions on the Words of Scripture, then attempt to impose their theology on everyone else. I believe that the Scripture is the best interpretation of scripture and, “No scripture is a private interpretation” (II Peter 1:21), i.e. no one verse stands alone, but must be interpreted in harmony with the rest of Scripture.

⁵ Jeff Robinson, “Study: Recent Grads 3 Times More Likely to be Calvinists,” <http://www.bpnews.net/BPnews.asp?ID=26914>.

⁶ Ibid.

following questions are asked to help Southern Baptists identify the problem and come to some sensible answers.

QUESTION ONE

Should any Southern Baptist fly under a particular flag? Most Southern Baptist pastors fly the SBC flag rather high, but some also have other flags. The followers of Henry Blackaby fly a revival flag over their church.⁷ Other SBC churches will fly a foreign missions flag over their church because they give money to mission causes or send their members on mission trips. John MacArthur flies a Bible expositional flag over his church, as does anyone who follows his example. Others wave the aggressive soul-winning flag, flown by those who in the past had strong bus ministries. Some have a “small group” flag, others have a “Sunday school” flag, and others have a “Southern gospel music” flag. There are many different types of flags flown over Southern Baptist churches.

So what’s wrong with a five point Calvinist flag? The problem is that most five point Calvinists don’t just point to their flag; many become exclusionary of any other view that will not salute their flag and fight for their flag in ecclesiastical battles. These five point Calvinists claim they have the right flag that should be flown over all churches. Some five point Calvinists try to proselyte everyone into their point of view. But the worst of all is the five pointer who feels his way is not only the right way, his way is the only way.⁸

⁷ Henry Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman Holman, 1994).

⁸This paragraph comes from observation of some theological students from all denominations, but including SBC students, who became convinced that five point Calvinism is the key to interpret Scripture. Also, as I’ve traveled to churches and spoken in pastor’s conventions, I’ve met representatives who reflect the “enthusiast” described in this paragraph.

Let's ask the five pointers some questions. Why would you want to fly an exclusive Calvinist flag over your church? Calvin was not a Baptist but the founder of the reformed theological system; the Presbyterian Church bases its theology on Calvin's reformed theology. Calvin did not espouse historic Baptist principles nor did Calvin espouse Baptist openness, which has historically embraced the sentiment, "let the minority have their say, let the majority have their way." If anything, Calvin was intolerant to the point he allowed the burning of Servetus at the stake because he disagreed with the reformed doctrine of Geneva.⁹ Be careful of some five pointers, with an intolerant DNA just like their forefathers.

A flag is a good thing to post on your front door on the Fourth of July so everyone knows where you stand. But be careful of the five pointer who waves his flag in attack of other churches or other believers, or anyone who holds a different persuasion than theirs. Ask yourself the question, "What flag do you salute?"¹⁰

QUESTION TWO

⁹ G.R. Elton, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History*, The Reformation 1520-1559, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 117.

¹⁰ While the enthusiast irritates us with their absolute assurance that they are right, and their simplistic ability to focus on a truth – one truth – while they ignore other facts that could help them arrive at the total truth of Scripture: let's remind ourselves there is profundity in simplicity.

There is great mystery in Calvinism. But the five-point enthusiast misses it because he only sees the universe as mechanistic and he only makes people *deterministic*. There is the alternate truth of man's freedom, man's responsibility, and man's emancipation. How else could God create man, since God demands authentic worship from man that comes from free choice?

Yes, God elects, God pre-determines and God plans. That's one rail of the track, but it takes two rails on which the train runs. The other rail is man, the awesome complex creation of God that He elevates to become like His Son. Man has the empowering ability of free choice. It's man's freedom that gives life and power to faith and the ability to move mountains.

The truth of God is balanced between these two rails and we stand between them and strain to see into infinity where the two rails come together, then we think we somehow see how they come together. But they don't and we don't. Only God sees how two seemingly opposite and contradicting truths fit together. "I stand amazed at the fathomless wealth of God's wisdom and God's knowledge. How could man ever understand His reasons, or explain His methods of working . . . For everything begins with Him, continues its existence because of Him, and ends in Him. To Him be the glory forever, Amen (Rom. 11:33, 34, 36 Phillips).

Is Calvinism a diversion against the Great Commission and baptism? One of the criticisms often heard against Calvinism is that it kills soul-winning and outreach. “If God has determined those who are going to get saved,” some wags ask, “why should I try to win souls?” Someone else said, “Most five-point Calvinists do not give a gospel invitation after they push to get people saved.”¹¹

But to answer question two, look at great Calvinists such as Charles Spurgeon who built the largest church in the world in the late 1800’s, zealously going after lost people. Tradition has it that Spurgeon said, “I’ll win as many as I can to Christ, and let the judgment seat of Christ sort the consequences. If God branded every elect person on his back; I would go around lifting shirttails to find out who was elect so I could win them to Christ.” But since God has not done that, Spurgeon tried to win every person to Christ he could. Spurgeon was an excellent model of evangelistic Calvinism. Even then research doesn’t show he preached often in the tenets of five point Calvinism. He preached “whosoever will, may come.”

The research by Ed Stetzer at LifeWay seems to indicate that Calvinistic churches say they are conducting personal evangelism at a slightly higher rate than their non-Calvinistic peers.¹² Also Stetzer points out that although Calvinistic churches baptize fewer people each year, they have a “baptism rate” virtually identical to that of non-Calvinists big churches. But again, Stetzer’s report did not distinguish between five point Calvinists and the generic Calvinist?

¹¹ The worst thing about five point Calvinism when properly understood is that it gives no hope to those who are not predestined. No hope is a terrible condemnation. If people have no hope of salvation or an intimate prayer life with God, or even heaven itself, then why did God put them here? On the other side of this issue, hope is the greatest motivation for any and all to seek after God and salvation. Does God really love everyone and offer them hope? Yes!

¹²Robinson.

Are all Calvinistic churches committed to indoctrinating five point Calvinism? Probably not. I make a difference between many Calvinists, whom I call “generic Calvinists” because they believe in the sovereignty of God, salvation by grace, and eternal security.¹³ A generic Calvinist is basically telling the world, “I am not an Arminian.” Generic Calvinists generally don’t fixate on the five points.

Technically, John Calvin could not be called a five point Calvinist, because the issue of five points known as TULIP, did not come into existence until years after John Calvin died.

In his early life John Calvin espoused extreme positions on predestination in his theology called the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹⁴ Later in life Calvin seemed to mellow his view of predestination as he studied the Scriptures more thoroughly by writing commentaries on every book of the Bible. As an example, his view on predestination opened when he wrote in his commentary on I John 2:2.

Christ suffered for the sins of the whole world, and in the goodness of God is offered unto all men without distinction, His blood being shed, not for a part of the world openly, but for the whole human race; for although in the world nothing is found worthy of the favor of God, yet He holds out the propitiation to the whole world, since without exception He summons all to the faith of Christ, which is nothing else than the door unto hope.¹⁵

¹³ I still refer to myself as a Calvinist, but that must be taken in context. I mean by that statement that I believe in the sovereignty of God, I believe in salvation by grace, and I believe in eternal security. When I preach at a meeting of Arminians (Pentecostal, Wesleyans, Freewill Baptist, or other groups that are Wesleyan in doctrine) I’m always identified as a Calvinist, and I’m very comfortable with that statement. However, when I meet some five point enthusiasts, they want to call me an Arminian, and they really don’t know what they’re saying nor do they know Arminian doctrine. But the worst is those who say I am a Pelagian, now that’s ignorant and offensive. Pelagius was a heretic. Like Arminius he didn’t believe in original sin and eternal security. But because Pelagius agreed with Arminius in a few points, doesn’t mean they are identical; this does not mean he’s the same as an Arminian. The doctrinal heresies of Pelagius will not be discussed here.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (Geneva, 1559).

¹⁵ Elmer Towns, *Theology for Today* (Fort Worth: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), p. 481 (reference to John Calvin, [Commentary on I John](#)).

The five points of Calvinism came into existence years after Calvin's death, growing out of a protest against Arminianism – the teaching of Jacob Hermann who lived from 1560 to 1609. Hermann is best known by the Latin form of his last name – Arminius. In 1618 a national senate of the church of the Netherlands convened in Dort to examine the teaching of Arminius in light of the scriptures. The council continued 144 sessions stretched over at least seven months. They concluded that the points of Arminianism were heresy. At that conference, they reaffirmed the reformed teaching of John Calvin and stated their conclusions in five points that has come to be expressed in the form of the acrostic forming the word *tulip*.¹⁶

- T – Total depravity
- U – Unconditional election (Some call it Unmerited Favor)
- L – Limited atonement
- I – Irresistible grace
- P – Perseverance of the Saints

Many Southern Baptists have historically been generic Calvinists, and many pastors would define themselves only as a three point or a four point Calvinist. Probably not a five point Calvinist.

QUESTION THREE

Is five point Calvinism a new intolerance? The world has become tolerant of any and every religion and almost any and every lifestyle, such as with the view that all religions lead to heaven if the worshipper is sincere. In face of such tolerance, the church must become more

¹⁶ For those who want to carefully study Calvinism, I invite them to look at *Theology for Today* by Elmer Towns (Fort Worth: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001). In this volume I study the weaknesses of Calvinism, pointing out that I am a Calvinist. I examine the weaknesses of each of the five points of TULIP. The next chapter I discuss the weaknesses of Arminianism. At other places in this volume I discuss the weaknesses of the Covenant or Reformed view of theology. Since I am a dispensationalist, I discuss the weaknesses of baptism by sprinkling, and I examine the strength of baptism by immersion. Before one is quick to judge this paper, I would invite them to a full study of Calvinism from someone's perspective that is not blinded by the limitations of Calvinism.

committed to the message that Jesus is the only way to Heaven (John 14:6). The church cannot reflect the kind of tolerance of the world; it must be committed to truth found only in Jesus Christ.

As we move into the influence of post-modernism, let us examine quickly the pre-modern world when Christianity was the dominant thought pattern of Western civilization. While the church was the dominant influence in early America, the church tolerated others to teach their contrary views, such as Jews, Mormons, and later other cults such as Christian Scientists, Jesus Only, and Baptismal Regeneration. They taught their divergent views in society or culture as a whole; their views were not allowed to be taught in the church. Christianity was tolerant of these views, but never espoused them. However the tolerance that the church showed to other views is not presently reciprocated. Now anti-Christian views are gaining influence, and they have become intolerant to the Christian church, denying the freedom to teach in public what they have always believed.

QUESTION FOUR

Will five-point Calvinism spread? If five-point Calvinism were an isolated doctrine that could be embedded into a church for only its members to enjoy, that would be fine, but does it preach “the whole council of God?” As an example, many deeper life pastors find a nugget of truth in the “abiding life,” and their church becomes a separatist congregation from all other churches because they go deeper into the Word each week to find new nuggets. Sometimes, nuggets become the reason to verify their existence. In the same way, five point Calvinists find their doctrine of predestination the main reason for their existence.

Most of the time five point Calvinists are described by tulip, a lovely flower that grows from a single bulb in the ground. A tulip shares its beauty and aroma. But often five-point Calvinism is like the dandelion; beautiful in its yellow and black flower, but no dandelion ever stands alone like a tulip. Rather dandelions spread their seeds across the entire lawn, blown about by the winds of fads and self-examination. And what more do we know about dandelions, they kill the surrounding grass and as they spread across a beautiful lawn, they can destroy an entire lawn. I have often said that in a theological institution, every spring the dandelions come up. By that I am referring to young Calvinistic enthusiasts who suddenly feel they know systematic theology better than their professors. Over the years many have attempted to engage me, debate me and even convert me. If I have the time, I am usually gracious and take them to lunch. I discuss the whole plan of God with them, including the nature of God, the nature of regeneration, dispensationalism, and the mysteries of God that no human can explain. Usually my five point enthusiast wants to talk about five or six words they find in Scripture. I grant them that these words verify their narrow point of view; but there is much more scripture than just these five or six words. We arrive at true Bible doctrine when we look at all of the Biblical text.

CONCLUSION

It is alright to be a Calvinist, but it is not alright to be a flag waving five point extremist that attacks any and every position or church that disagrees with its own. Many Calvinistic churches take their place in the Southern Baptist Convention next to non-Calvinist churches, and commit themselves to winning souls, baptizing new converts, supporting church planting around the world. If that happens, then it is alright to be a Calvinist and Calvinist churches will find a warm home in the Southern Baptist Convention.

It is alright not to be a Calvinist. There will be many churches in the Southern Baptist Convention not influenced by reformed theology and the intricacies of how God pre-ordained certain ones to salvation. These non-Calvinist churches will be satisfied to search out lost people, take the Word of God at face value, and carry out the commands of the New Testament. These non-Calvinist churches will probably be dispensational churches that see a distinction between the Old and New Testament (Baptism was an entirely new practice). They will not be driven by covenant theology that sees baptism as an extension of circumcision, thus leading to the practice of sprinkling children. They will not confirm the faith of their youth in confirmation classes. Rather, they will expose their young to an altar call where everyone - including children and youth - are led to Christ through a tangible conversion experience. They will baptize new believers in water as a testimony of their faith.

It is alright to vote against an exclusionary five point Calvinism. Since the Southern Baptist Convention is an open organization, everyone who is Southern Baptist has a right to speak their convictions, and explain their biblical positions. While they don't have a right to force their opinion on other people, all Southern Baptists have a right to their private interpretation of Scripture. However, after five-pointers have had their opportunity to speak, it's alright if the majority of Southern Baptists vote against them. Again, the Baptists dictum, "Let the minority have their say, let the majority have their way" should be maintained.

It's alright to ignore a five point Calvinist church. There's very little teaching in the Scriptures that directs one church to attempt to correct another church. We see Paul the apostle correcting churches, but he did so from his apostolic position. Look at the way he addressed his letters, "Paul, an apostle." The SBC is not a denomination but a convention of churches that have voted to fellowship and work together to carry out the Great Commission.

Denominations are committed to correcting variant churches that believe or teach doctrine and lifestyle that differ with the denomination. Some denominations control deviant local churches by their bishops or superintendents, others by vote of exclusion. While denominations correct their wandering sheep, the SBC holds firmly to the autonomy of the local church and that one church cannot rule another church, but they can dis-fellowship it.

Southern Baptist believe that every church has the Word of God, and it is that church's responsibility to study the Word, apply the Word, and live by the principles of the Word of God. Therefore, if a church wanders off into five point Calvinism, no other church has an obligation or biblical directive to try to censor that church with a view of correcting it. As long as a church believes and teaches the fundamentals of the faith and commits itself to the Baptist Faith and Message it is welcome in the SBC.

Christians ought not to be extreme with any doctrine. An extremist is one who emphasizes one point while neglecting the whole. We are told, "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" (II Pet. 1:20). Baptists use this verse to prove their belief in the priesthood of believers. In other words, we must interpret Scripture within the fellowship of other believers, and we must interpret Scripture within the teaching of all Scripture. The extremists overemphasize words such as *elect* and *predestination*, and *chosen*. They omit phrases such as "whosoever will" and "reconciled the world unto Himself." We must be students of the whole Word.¹⁷

¹⁷ I received the attached letter from pastor Mike O'Brien, who took over an SBC church that lost over half of its members and attendees due to extreme Calvinistic preaching:

"You have asked for a response to the article and I will give you one. Having taken over a 'flag' waving 5 point church at Old Forest Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, VA, I very much appreciate your article. In fact, my D.Min. project was 'The Effects of Calvinism on Southern Baptist Churches.' I have firsthand experience taking over such a church. The first thing I did

was take the 'flag' down! We still have some 5 pointers at the church, but most of them have put their flags away. In fact, I have preached heavily on Unlimited Atonement. Most have come to believe the Scriptures at that point"

"I think your article was very fair and historically accurate. Unfortunately, many in the convention on both sides of the debate are not being intellectually honest. Some have even tried to say that Spurgeon was not a Calvinist! That type of nonsense does not help. I fear that it may split the convention. Both sides need to be honest and fellowship together as long as they are unified on reaching people for Christ. (As a side note, I am most concerned about many of the 5 point Calvinist's eschatology, not their soteriology.) With your permission I would like to distribute your article to my leadership team at the Old Forest Road Baptist Church."