

Calvinism in the SBC

By Jeff Spry

Call it what you will--Calvinism, reformed theology, the doctrines of grace--these truths are nothing less than historic Southern Baptist orthodoxy. This is the theology which gave rise to the formation and early development of the great missionary and evangelistic enterprise which we know as the Southern Baptist Convention. This is what our forefathers believed to be the true teaching of Scripture. These are the doctrines on which they built their churches and which undergirded their ministries. And if these doctrines were true then, they are still true today, because the Bible has not changed, God has not changed, and truth does not change. Read some of the quotes from Baptists leaders from our past and present.

- John A. Broadus, former president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary: "From the divine side, we see that the Scriptures teach an eternal election of men to eternal life simply out of God's good pleasure." When he was traveling through Switzerland, gazing at the majestic Alps, he wrote the following in a letter which was published in the Western Recorder:

The people who sneer at what is called Calvinism might as well sneer at Mont Blanc. We are not in the least bound to defend all of Calvin's options or actions, but I do not see how anyone who really understands the Greek of the Apostle Paul or the Latin of Calvin and Turretin can fail to see that these latter did but interpret and formulate substantially what the former teaches . . . Whatever the inspired writers meant to teach is authoritative, the truth of God.

- **B. H. Carroll**, founder and first president of the Southwestern Baptist Seminary: "Every one that God chose in Christ is drawn by the Spirit to Christ. Every one predestined is called by the Spirit in time, and justified in time, and will be glorified when the Lord comes."
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- **James P. Boyce**, founder and first president of Southern Baptist Seminary: "God, of His own purpose, has from eternity determined to save a definite number of mankind as individuals, not for or because of any merit or works of theirs, nor of any value of them to Him; but of His own good pleasure." When Southern Seminary was established, Boyce reports that the Philadelphia Confession was seriously considered as the official confessional statement of the seminary. For several compelling reasons, however, a separate confession was constructed by a committee with Basil Manly, Jr., at its head. One guiding concern prominent in its composition was that it must include "a complete exhibition of the fundamental doctrines of grace, so that in no essential particular should they speak dubiously." Boyce's Abstract of Systematic Theology placed God's sovereign purposes in salvation at the heart of his discussion from the attributes of God to the final judgment. God's righteous sovereignty permeated his system because, in his view, it permeated all of Scripture. After spending several pages expounding what Boyce called "the Calvinistic theory of personal, unconditional, and eternal Election," he argued that resistance to the doctrine "arises from an unwillingness on the part of man to recognize the sovereignty of God, and to ascribe salvation entirely to grace."
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- **Andrew Fuller** also held to the Doctrines of Grace. He clearly advocated the doctrine of election in his *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, where he affirms that "none ever did or will believe in Christ but those who are chosen of God from eternity."
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- **F. H. Kerfoot**, As late as 1905, Boyce's successor as professor of systematic theology at Southern Seminary, could still say, "Nearly all Baptists believe what are usually termed the 'doctrines of grace.'"
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- **John Dagg**, (1794-1884) was one who inherited and disseminated this body of shared protestant theology, albeit with baptistic distinctives in matters of baptism and church government. His particular distinction comes in being the first Baptist theologian in the south to publish a

systematic theology after 1845. In 1857, the Charleston-based Southern Baptist Publication Society (predecessor to the Sunday School Board) published his 379-page Manual of Theology. This was followed the next year by the Society's publication of his 312-page companion volume Treatise of Church Order, and the next by the publication of his Elements of Moral Science. The first two of these, used as theological textbooks throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, were later republished together as the Manual of Theology and Church Order (Gano Books, 1982). Dagg's theology was reformed, or Calvinistic. His theology was not Calvinistic in the sense of being a full reproduction of the teachings of John Calvin (1509-1564). Calvin's teachings are too far-reaching and complex to be accurately summarized by a single word. On the other hand, Dagg's understanding of Christian theology was Calvinistic not merely in the sense of affirming the sovereignty of God, but in the sense of holding to what are often termed the "five points."

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- **W. T. Conner**, professor of theology, Southwestern Baptist Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas: "The doctrine of election means that God saves in pursuance of an eternal purpose. This includes all the gospel influence, work of the Spirit and so on, that leads a man to repent of his sins and accept Christ. So far as man's freedom is concerned, the doctrine of election does not mean that God decrees to save a man irrespective of his will. It rather means that God purposes to lead a man in such a way that he will freely accept the gospel and be saved."
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- **Basil Manly**, who was pastor of FBC Charleston from March of 1826 through November 2 of 1837, part of which time James P. Boyce, founder and first president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was a lad in the church. His sermon entitled Divine Efficiency Consistent with Human Activity, preached in 1849 in Alabama captures the spirit which was dominant in the churches in those days. Manly contends that men reject the doctrine of divine efficiency because "the doctrine of dependence on the divine being throws us constantly into the hands, and on the mercy of God. Proud man does not like it." In concluding a section in which he had spoken boldly and deeply concerning the nature of God's foreknowledge, Manly exclaimed, "My brethren, however mysterious and incomprehensible it may be, that God chose a poor sinner like me--freely chose me, loved me, redeemed me, called me, justified me, and will glorify me--I will rejoice in the truth, and thank him for his free grace! O, where is boasting then? Not at the feet of Jesus, not at the cross. It belongs not to that position."
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- **Charles Spurgeon**, The Prince of Preachers, in a sermon delivered on Matthew 24:24 (April 22, 1860): "I do not hesitate to say, that next to the doctrine of the crucifixion and the resurrection of our blessed Lord - no doctrine had such prominence in the early Christian church as the doctrine of the election of Grace." He also said "It is no novelty, then, that I am preaching; no new doctrine. I love to proclaim these strong old doctrines, which are called by nickname Calvinism, but which are surely and verily the revealed truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus" - Election, preached September 2, 1855. The following was taken from his sermon entitled, A Defense of Calvinism:

I suppose there are some persons whose minds naturally incline towards the doctrine of free-will. I can only say that mine inclines as naturally towards the doctrines of sovereign grace. Sometimes, when I see some of the worst characters in the street, I feel as if my heart must burst forth in tears of gratitude that God has never let me act as they have done!

'Salvation is of the Lord.' That is just an epitome of Calvinism; it is the sum and substance of it. If anyone should ask me what I mean by a Calvinist, I should reply, "He is one who says, Salvation is of the Lord." I cannot find in Scripture any other doctrine than this. It is the essence of the Bible. "He only is my rock and my salvation." Tell me anything contrary to this truth, and it will be a heresy; tell me a heresy, and I shall find its essence here, that it has departed from this great, this fundamental, this rock-truth, "God is my rock and my salvation."

I have my own private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what nowadays is called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism; Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel, if we do not preach justification by faith, without works; nor unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel, unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called, and suffers the children of God to be burned in the fires of damnation after having once believed in Jesus. Such a gospel I abhor.

If Christ on His cross intended to save every man, then He intended to save those who were lost before He died. If the doctrine be true, that He died for all men, then He died for some who were in hell before He came into this world, for doubtless there were even then myriads there who had been cast away because of their sins. Once again, if it was Christ's intention to save all men, how deplorably has He been disappointed, for we have His own testimony that there is a lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, and into that pit of woe have been cast some of the very persons who, according to the theory of universal redemption, were bought with His blood. That seems to me a conception a thousand times more repulsive than any of those consequences which are said to be associated with the Calvinistic and Christian doctrine of special and particular redemption.

There is no soul living who holds more firmly to the doctrines of grace than I do, and if any man asks me whether I am ashamed to be called a Calvinist, I answer—I wish to be called nothing but a Christian; but if you ask me, do I hold the doctrinal views which were held by John Calvin, I reply, I do in the main hold them, and rejoice to avow it.

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- **Thomas J. Nettles** (Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary), “In short, the doctrine of election states that - before the foundation of the world - God chose certain individuals to salvation and ordained the means by which they are saved.”
- **Dr. Al Mohler** (President of Southern Theological Seminary), “I am a Baptist evangelical by conviction. I am a theologian and like those who established the Southern Baptist Convention, I come from a tradition from which the Baptist tradition originated and that is out of English Separatism which came out of English Calvinism and Congregationalism. I am going to fly my colors boldly, as you should in dealing with brothers in biblical truth. There are fixed theological alternatives. These come in labels and traditions. I am reformed by conviction, the same kind of tradition that produced Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, B.H. Carroll or J.B. Gambrell. If you want to talk about “Five Points,” which is a way you will never hear me talk, I believe in the sovereignty of God as the guiding principle of interpreting Scripture and I also believe in the absolute necessity of personal experience. My concern is not to take Calvinism or any other –ism to its logical conclusion but to find the biblical wholeness. Like Dr. Gambrell and Dr. Boyce and Dr. Carroll and others, I stand on the fact that Jesus said that no man can come to me unless the Father draws him to me. The doctrines of election or predestination were not invented by John Calvin in the Reformation or Augustine in the fourth century. They are in the Scriptures. Every Baptist, every Christian has to believe in election and predestination. They’re in the Bible. Now how you believe they operate is a different issue. I believe that from the beginning to the end that salvation is the action of a gracious God in saving sinners. I’m going to be honest: If you ask me if I’m a Calvinist, I’m going to have to answer, “Yes.” If you ask me to describe myself theologically, that is not the first, second, third, fourth or even tenth word I would use because there are other [better] words. I claim no “ism.” I stand on sola Scriptura. The Bible says quite clearly that no one can come to me unless the Father draws him to me and that same Scripture says

whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How those things are tied together – different theologians will disagree.

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- **Dr. James Leo Garrett**, who teaches at Southwestern Theological Seminary, was addressing young men who were preparing for the ministry. He introduced the session by stating his purpose: to introduce some sub-types of Southern Baptist Theology. Dr. Garrett mentioned five movements within the convention. First he mentioned The Charismatic Movement; second, Dispensationalism; third, The Biblical Inerrancy Movement; fourth, The Keswick Movement. The fifth movement he mentions is The Calvinistic Movement. He refers to it as neo-Calvinism. I feel that he would have been more accurate to refer to it as "paleo" meaning the old Calvinism. I wish to state just how honestly and accurately Dr. Garrett stated the truth about our Calvinistic roots:

Now, this is a movement that asserts the truth and viability of the strong Calvinism; it is an affirmation of strong Calvinism that we can find in our Southern Baptist past and our English Baptist past. It is in a sense an effort to recapture the Calvinism that has been lost in the last three quarters of the century, or so, and to cover this involves a new emphasis on the writings of John L. Dagg and James P. Boyce and of the 1644 and 1689 Particular Baptist Confessions of Faith.

Now, I would like to say that there is one difference that I can see between the neo-Calvinist movement and the other four. You may want to disagree with this, and that's all right. I believe that it differs from the other four in that it can more widely claim to be endemic to the Baptist past, the Baptist heritage and teaching of the past, than can the other four.

What I am saying is that whether we want to be Calvinist or not today any serious study of our Baptist past must acknowledge that Baptists have been Calvinists. To distort this is to distort the records, it seems to me. So what I am saying is that it seems to me that the neo-Calvinist movement is able to say, 'we are recovering part of our Baptist past' in a way that the charismatic movement cannot say, because the charismatic movement represents something that is not endemic to the Baptist past, that has not been a common practice in Baptist churches through the years, and not been a teaching that has prevailed.

It's not to say, this is not to deal with the question whether tongues exist, or, is just saying it is not a part of the Baptist past the way the Calvinistic doctrine is. So I think I can draw that one distinction and be relatively fair in that assessment, and that dispensationalism as well is not endemic to the Baptist past in the same way that this new Reformed or Calvinistic theology is endemic. I don't mean to suggest by that, that therefore it is valid and the other four not, in some kind of sweeping statement. I am simply making that observation.

If Spurgeon is correct, there sure have been a lot of preachers successful in avoiding a very important and prominent Bible truth. Spurgeon said, "There seems to be an inveterate prejudice in the human mind against this doctrine, and although most other doctrines will be received by professing Christians, some with caution, others with pleasure, yet this one seems to be most frequently disregarded and discarded."

If it were true in Spurgeon's day, I wonder what he would say now when most pulpits are silent about it, and therefore, the pews ignorant of it. The Old Baptist Confessions, such as, The Baptist Confession of 1689 (London Confession): The Philadelphia Confession of 1742; all these confessions are crystal clear on the blessed doctrine of Sovereign Election.

The treatment the doctrine of election receives from the hands of its enemies is much like that received by the early Christians from pagan Roman Emperors. The early Christians were often clothed in the skins of animals and then subjected to attack by ferocious wild beasts. So the doctrine of election is often clothed in ugly garb and held up to ridicule and erroneous attacks.

In a study of Southern Baptist theology entitled *Winds of Doctrine*, W. Wiley Richards locates the origin of Calvinism's decline in the middle half of the nineteenth century. His thesis is interesting but his evidence is ambivalent. Only slight, isolated, and idiosyncratic declines from Calvinism entered Southern Baptist theology prior to the 20th century. No one of trend-setting influence seriously challenged the Calvinistic hegemony before the arrival of E. Y. Mullins as president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1899. He had entered as a student in 1881, receiving his degree in 1885. His return as president came after serving pastorates in Baltimore, Maryland, and Newton Center, Massachusetts. During his 29 years as president, Mullins became a dominant force in Southern Baptist denominational life (convention president 1921-24) as well as a world-wide Baptist leader (president of the Baptist World Alliance 1923-28). Mullins was heavily influenced by the New Hampshire Confession of Faith.

But one cannot escape the fact that Calvinism or Reformed Theology or the Doctrines of Grace have been believed and taught by the best and brightest of Christendom. The viewpoint of **Augustine**, which was, in reality, simply the Calvinistic viewpoint, was known as Augustinianism during medieval times. Many Augustinian monks held to Augustine's basic viewpoint. However, as the centuries rolled by, the Augustinian viewpoint was watered down. Some taught it more consistently than others. **Thomas Aquinas** taught it, although he also included many Catholic doctrines that Augustine would not have agreed with. **John Wycliffe**, the morning star of the reformation, taught it more clearly than Aquinas, although he was plagued with some Catholic thinking also.

The Protestant Reformation was an attempt to restore the viewpoint of Augustine. **Martin Luther** was an Augustinian Monk and was greatly influenced by the teachings of Augustine. He held unswervingly to Augustine's emphasis upon predestination. All of the other leaders of the reformation agreed with Augustine and Luther on that point. **John Calvin** taught Augustine's viewpoint so clearly and consistently that after Calvin's time Augustinianism was renamed "Calvinism". **John Knox**, the Scottish reformer held to Calvin's view as well. So did a host of others including **Theodore Beza, William Farrel, Ulrich Zwingli** and **William Tyndale**.

After the reformation, Calvinism remained the dominant theological viewpoint both in Europe and America, except among Catholics. Calvinists included such people as **John Bunyan**, the writer of *Pilgrim's Progress*, **John Newton**, the writer of the Hymn "Amazing Grace", **Augustus Toplady**, the writer of the Hymn, "Rock of Ages", **Charles Spurgeon**, the great Baptist preacher of England known as the "prince of preachers", **George Muller**, the founder of many orphanages, **George Whitefield**, the greatest evangelist in history and the central preacher of the Great Awakening, **Jonathan Edwards**, America's most famous philosopher and the intellectual leader of the Great Awakening, and **William Carey**, the father of the modern missions movement. Other Calvinists include **Adoniram Judson, Donald Barnhouse, A.A. Hodge, Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhof, John Owen, J. Vernon McGee, J. Gresham Machen, B.B. Warfield, David Brainerd, Isaac Backus, Robert Moffat, A.H. Strong and Arthur W. Pink, John Gill, B.B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, J.B. Tidwell, Cotton Mather**.

In the Baptist tradition, **James P. Boyce** and **Basil Manly** were strong Calvinists but they were not alone. Their theology was no anomaly in early Southern Baptist life. **W. B. Johnson**, first President of the SBC, was a Calvinist. **R. B. C. Howell**, second President of the SBC, was a Calvinist. **Richard Fuller**, third President of the SBC, was a Calvinist. **Charles Dutton Mallary**, first recording secretary of the SBC Foreign Mission Board, was a Calvinist. So was **B. H. Carroll**, founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. **Patrick Hues Mell**, President of the SBC for seventeen years, longer than any other man, was a polemic defender of Calvinism. Other Baptists we know include such men as, **John Dagg, John Broadus, Sr., Basil Manly, Jr., Luther Rice, and Richard Furman**, to name just a few who counted themselves among Reformed theologians.

Today, we know of such individuals as **J.I. Packer, D. James Kennedy, R.C. Sproul, John MacArthur, John Piper, James Montgomery Boice, Al Mohler, Timothy George, Tom Nettles, Roger Nicole, Don Whitney, D.A. Carson, Bruce Waltke, John Stott, Jerry Bridges and Michael S. Horton** are among those who come to mind. Popular Christian artists such as **Steve Green, Steve Camp, Michael Card, Wes King and Joni Erikkson Tada** are Calvinists. Although, this list of names is in no way a proof of Calvinism (every one of them certainly may have been wrong - they are all fallible men) - this is meant

as an encouragement to those who may feel alone in their beliefs. This is meant to show that Calvinism is not a weird out-of-the-mainstream idea held only by a certain few who “just don’t get it.”