

Calvinism on the March

By David W. Cloud

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(first published October 18, 2006) (David Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org; for instructions about subscribing and unsubscribing or changing addresses, see the information paragraph at the end of the article)

Calvinism on the March Among Evangelicals

A 2007 study shows that Calvinism is on the rise in the Southern Baptist Convention and is especially prominent among recent seminary graduates. Ed Stetzer, director of LifeWay Research, says that nearly 30% of recent graduates now serving as pastors are Calvinists (“Calvinism on the Rise,” *Christian Post*, Nov. 29, 2007). Roughly 10% of SBC pastors at large define themselves as Calvinists, but that includes only those who hold to all five points of TULIP theology and not those who hold to sovereign or unconditional election but not necessarily to all other points of Calvinism. LifeWay Research limits their surveys to a very narrow definition of Calvinism, and I suspect it might not want to know the true influence of Calvinism in the convention.

A report in *Christianity Today* for September 2006 was entitled “Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism Is Making a Comeback--And Shaking up the Church.” It documents the rapid spread of Calvinism in Evangelical circles, and I am seeing the same thing among Fundamentalists.

The report cites John Piper, R.C. Sproul, R. Albert Mohler, Louie Giglio, Joshua Harris, J.I. Packer, and the Puritans as among the chief influences responsible for the upsurge in Calvinism. Piper’s book “Desiring God” has sold more than 275,000 copies.

The trend toward the acceptance of Calvinism is evident at leading evangelical seminaries such as Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Under the direction of Al Mohler, Southern Seminary has become “a Reformed hotbed” and is turning out “a steady flow of young Reformed pastors.”

Writing in *SBC Life*, Malcolm Yarnell, associate professor of systematic theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, observed that TULIP theology is causing division in churches. Steve Lemke, provost of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, warns: “I believe that [Calvinism] is potentially the most explosive and divisive issue facing us in the near future. It has already been an issue that has split literally dozens of churches, and it holds the potential to split the entire convention” (“The Future of Southern Baptists as Evangelicals,” April 2005). Lemke says that “the newest generation of Southern Baptist ministers” is “the most Calvinist we have had in several generations.” He warns that Calvinism can result in a lowered commitment to evangelism, saying: “For many people, if they’re convinced that God has already elected those who will be elect ... I don’t see how humanly speaking that can’t temper your passion, because you know you’re not that crucial to the process.

There are exceptions to this, but in my estimation there can be no doubt that Calvinism tends to cool evangelistic fervor. Among Calvinists, evangelism is done IN SPITE OF Calvinism, not because of it. Those who protest that it doesn’t hinder evangelism point to EXCEPTIONS rather than to the rule. While Charles Spurgeon was an evangelistic Calvinist, for example, a large number of Calvinists of his day opposed him and denounced his broad,

indiscriminate invitations for sinners to come to Christ. One Calvinist publication warned in Spurgeon's day, "... to preach that it is man's duty to believe savingly in Christ is ABSURD" (Earthen Vessel, 1857; cited in Spurgeon vs. the Hyper Calvinists by Iain Murray).

Calvinism almost killed the evangelistic zeal of the Baptist churches of England in the 18th century. Baptist historian Thomas Armitage wrote: "William Carey's 'Inquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use means for the Conversion of the Heathen' was published in 1792, but it found few readers and produced little effect. To most of the Baptists Carey's views were visionary and even wild, in open conflict with God's sovereignty. At a meeting of ministers, where the senior [John] Ryland presided, Carey proposed that at the next meeting they discuss the duty of attempting to spread the Gospel amongst the heathen. ... Ryland, shocked, sprang to his feet and ordered Carey to sit down, saying: 'When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid or mine!'"

CALVINISM ALSO ON THE MARCH AMONG FUNDAMENTALISTS

A few years ago I visited the BOB JONES UNIVERSITY bookstore and was amazed at the large number of volumes that were available on Puritanism, and there is no warning about the Reformed theology. I thought to myself at the time that this probably signifies that many BJU teachers and graduates are being influenced by Puritan theology.

Since then I have seen growing evidence of this. I know of formerly non-Calvinist Baptist churches that have become Calvinistic after BJU graduates were called to the pastorate. On a recent trip to Australia I was shown a publication ("Why Read the Puritans Today") that was sent out to an independent Baptist mailing list by a BJ graduate. The booklet lists 10 reasons for the renewed interest in Puritanism. The recommendation was not accompanied by any warning about Reformed theology and its attendant Calvinism and Amillennialism. I don't know if this BJ grad is a Calvinist, but he is certainly helping to promote Calvinism with this type of thing.

Bible Truths 6 for Christian Schools, Teacher's Edition, third edition, published by BJU Press, features statements and questions that encourage Calvinistic thinking. These include the following from Lessons 4 and 5: "Did God choose to save certain people but offer salvation to all?" and "Should a Christian worry about whether he has been chosen to be a child of God?" The textbook defines predestination to salvation as "to determine destiny beforehand."

And this is not something limited to those associated with Bob Jones. In 2005 an extensive survey was done of "young fundamentalists." Entitled "Young Fundamentalists' Beliefs and Personal Life," the survey results are available online at

<http://www.sharperiron.org/downloads/2005%20Young%20Fundamentalists%20Survey%20Results.pdf>.

For the purposes of the survey, a "young fundamentalist" is one who is under 35 years old. The survey contained 135 questions pertaining to life and doctrine, and roughly 1,100 surveys were completed. The vast majority of respondents identified themselves with three fundamentalist schools: Bob Jones University (29%), Maranatha Baptist Bible College (22%), and Northland Baptist Bible College (21%). When it comes to Calvinist views, an amazing 58% of the respondents hold a Calvinist view of sovereign election, with another 8% unsure. **THUS ONLY ABOUT 35% OF THE RESPONDENTS TO THE FUNDAMENTALIST SURVEY REJECT CALVINISM.** Some 14% of the respondents hold to either amillennial (8%) or postmillennial (5%) views, which goes hand in hand with Reformed theology. I believe we will see this percentage increase in coming days, with a growing rejection of the pre-millennial, pre-tribulation position.

When someone put the original edition of my article on the growth of Calvinism (from our Friday Church News Notes) on the SHAPERIRON.ORG blog site, there were 16 pages of responses and most of the replies were either in favor of or sympathetic toward Calvinism or were neutral. Many of them ridiculed me in a fashion that I have found to be typical among “young” Calvinists. A haughty smirkness characterized many of the responses.

Another avenue whereby Calvinism is entering fundamentalist churches and homes is VISION FORUM. This organization has a worthy goal of building godly families and exhorting fathers to take the headship of their homes, and many of their materials are excellent and helpful. But Vision Forum is founded upon and permeated with Reformed Calvinistic theology. The statement of faith includes the following: “All who were chosen in Christ from eternity past are born again by the Holy Spirit, respond from their new hearts with repentance and faith in Jesus, are justified on the basis of the shed blood of Christ, become children of God, and are indwelt, sanctified, and sealed by the Holy Spirit until they are glorified at Christ’s return.” Vision Forum books include the following: John Calvin: Man of the Millennium, The Story of the English Puritans, The World’s Greatest Reformation History Library, The Geneva Bible Calvin Legacy Edition, Children’s Stories of the Reformation, Stories of the Covenanters in Scotland, Reformation Heroes, Famous Women of the Reformed Church, Puritan Fathers Classics Library, Gill’s Body of Doctrinal Divinity (hyper, hyper Calvinism). They even sell a statue of John Calvin!

Vision Forum is anti-dispensational and rejects the imminent, pre-tribulational return of Jesus Christ. They have no emphasis upon preaching the gospel to the ends of the earth. This is not even mentioned in their mission statement, though it is THE thing that Jesus Christ emphasized after He rose from the dead (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:44-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8) and is THE emphasis of the book of Acts.

FEEDBACK FROM PASTORS

In response to an article I posted to the Fundamental Baptist Information Service on September 25, 2006, I got many e-mails from pastors who confirmed my view that Calvinism is growing among fundamental Baptists. Following are a few excerpts from these e-mails:

“I would have to say that from what I have seen your concern about Calvinism growing in our circles is not unfounded. The Bible college from which I graduated took a stand against Calvinism (and still does officially), but during some recent turmoil there, they have brought back to head the Bible department a man who just a few years ago was pressured to leave because of his calvinistic beliefs. ... it is disappointing to see how few preachers even recognize the calvinistic nature of his teachings, or are willing to look into them. He and the school deny any calvinism, but I have seen his class notes, and talked to students in his classes, and the calvinism is plain to see for anyone looking for it.

“I see Calvinism as becoming a greater and greater problem as time progresses and I have stated the same to my own church family as well. Not only are many of the independent Baptist churches leaning towards Calvinism, but the one IFCA church in town is also infiltrated by Calvinism. At the very least, much of what I have seen amongst Independent Baptist Churches around here is a softness regarding Calvinism -- a refusal to address the false teachings that John Calvin and his followers propagated.

“I think that Calvinism has long been in Independent Baptist churches. I left Tennessee Temple Seminary in 1978 because I was discouraged by the Calvinism there. Dr. Wingate was the main culprit but there were others. Dr. Preston Philips was a 5 pointer.

“I have also noticed a Calvinistic trend among ‘young fundamentalists’ who blog a lot online. The typical ‘young fundamentalist’ blogger, from what I’ve seen, is one reared in a Hyles type church, who may have even attended

H.A.C., and who later rejects the 'hysterical' elements of that kind of fundamentalism, including the shallow soul-winning techniques. By the by, they drop a lot of what they formerly stood for, including the KJV, etc. Once they get past the 'A B C repeat after me' salvation formula, their soteriology often seems to come full swing into the realm of Calvinism. I view it as a matter of backlash against the methods they were trained with. They begin to question the shallow side, and rightly so, but while still in that questioning phase they are ripe for the pickings to false teachers of every sort on the subject. Their natural inclination is to run as far away as they can from the false no-repentance salvation, and they run right past the Biblical position straight into the arms of Calvin. They also tend to get mixed up on exactly what is and what is not properly to be labeled 'Lordship Salvation.' ... You have to figure for so many that are out there blogging, there must be hundreds that are not. It makes you wonder how pervasive and common it really is, especially among the younger set, and especially among those who leave Hyles-ism behind them.

"You are absolutely correct in your assumption that Calvinism is growing among fundamentalism. I've been a fundamentalist all my life, and I was at one point a 5-point Calvinist. I am NOT any longer, but I do believe I can look at this particular subject from an 'inside' view. I knew at my college (Pensacola Christian College) there was (and I believe still is) a large Calvinist 'underground.' In fact, there is at least one Bible faculty member there who is rumored to be one. The most obvious place to look is on the Sharper Iron blog (www.sharperiron.org). You can see it there in the forums. I think this may also be attributed to the growing influence of John MacArthur, John Piper and Mike Dever among fundamentalists.

"I believe Calvinism is rapidly spreading through fundamental Baptist circles fueled mainly by the theological inclusivism of many of our Bible Colleges and seminaries.

"Simply said, I know of several young graduates who have come out of Bob Jones who have this Calvinistic mentality who did not enter with it.

"I hear that Calvinism is being promoted in many fundamental Bible colleges and seminaries. I notice more and more Calvinistic and Banner of Truth books each time I visit the BJU campus bookstore. ... I think many younger preachers start reading Calvinists and eventually become 'Five-Pointers.'

"Most of the 'conservative' pastors in the upstate South Carolina area align themselves with the idea that they are a 2 to 3 point Calvinist. However, when I first became a pastor in the area over 11 years ago the men that were 2 to 3 points are now full 5 point Calvinists and 9 out of 10 are in the purpose driven/Rick Warren influence. It may also be noted that all the Baptist Churches that are dropping the Baptist name and becoming a purpose driven church are pastored by 5 point Calvinists. One even is named Five Point Fellowship.

"I have personally witnessed Calvinism on the rise in Fundamental Baptist circles ever since the 1960's. I am from upstate NY, and my family attended a Dutch Reformed church where Calvinism is essential to the belief system which includes both Covenant and Reformed Theology. Both independent Baptist churches in our area were heavily influenced by Calvinistic teachings in the 1970's from BBC Clarks Summit. ... Here in Illinois, I have engaged a new pastor who adopted Calvinism while a missionary. ... He claims to be leading his people into the views of amillennialism, while he is feeding them a weekly diet of calvinistic and covenant theology.

"I am deeply concerned with the spread of Calvinism in fundamental schools today. I'm afraid many young preachers are accepting the Calvin Philosophy as an easy way out to avoid to the work of soulwinning. Sadly, we have a lot of 'professional pastors' but very few 'soulwinning pastors' today. I know all the theological problems with Calvinism, but how about addressing the practical problems like churches not growing, souls not being saved, drawing people from other churches but seeing very few salvations. Our churches are in trouble and we had better

get back to some old-fashioned evangelism!

“A very good friend of mine said to me, ‘Bob, what changes have you seen here in American churches since you've been back?’ I quickly noted the rise in reformed theology in some of my supporting churches, as well as just talk along those lines that pastors have alluded to or directly spoken in support of getting back to reformed thinking. He said he had not noticed that but would pay more attention. About a month later, he phoned me and said that I was right. He is seeing it more and more, and reviewing some past occasions, he remembers more talk in that area. So, there truly is a trend developing here in this area.

WHY CAVINISM IS GROWING AMONG INDEPEPENDENT BAPTISTS

The following are some of the replies I received from pastors in regard to why Calvinism is increasing among fundamental Baptists:

The following is from Pastor Wilber Unger, Bethel Baptist Church, London, Ontario, --

“First, I think it is a response to the sickening practice of shallow, unscriptural methods of evangelism in our Baptist Churches. Any believer with spiritual discernment must conclude, in time, that what we have seen for the last 35 years is not true Biblical evangelism. As a movement in general we have deceived people who are now hanging on to a false hope and will die and go to hell--little different than the RC church or any other false religion. ... As a consequence of the above mentioned condition, some churches may now be swinging the pendulum in the opposite direction. I think I did that at one point.

“Secondly, there are a lot of popular names in our day who are promoting Calvinism. A large percentage of the books available are written by Calvinists who are subtly promoting their unscriptural teachings. Many people will accept what they say based on the credibility the so-called Christian community has given them. In my opinion, very few people really accept the Word of God as their rule for faith and practice. Most people are content to accept what they hear because they trust the speaker or writer. Following a leader who is persuasive and seemingly sincere and popular is good enough for them. Bible truth is of lesser importance. If the plain words of Scripture don't mean what they say and if new definitions have been given to words and people willingly accept such serious error how can you help them?

“Thirdly, I think there is a serious ignorance as to the heresy in Calvinism. Augustine, who is accepted by Rome as one of its church fathers, is quite heretical in many of his teachings. When Luther and Calvin came along, they came part of the way out of Rome and gave new life to some of Augustine's teaching. In some cases, Calvin exceeded Augustine's heresies. Both men kept infant baptism, and both persecuted and killed “heretics”--those who followed the word of God faithfully and rejected the heresies of Calvin. I think if people knew the history of Calvinism and its heretical position from the beginning, they wouldn't be so easily deceived by it.

“Fourthly, Reformed theology has become popular and Premillennialism is losing its appeal and influence. I believe this is in preparation for the whole Protestant movement to make its way back to Rome. It is very sad to see Baptists who are so loose and careless with God's Word, move in the direction of compromise; first with the worldly evangelicals and later with Rome. God forbid!

“Fifth, I think it is unwise to align ourselves in any way with Calvinists who seem to be evangelistic, and some are! For example, Ian Paisley's group or Peter Masters in London, England. I have listened to some of Ian Paisley's

sermons and I think he is a powerful preacher and filled with the Spirit, but he holds to Calvinism, and that is dangerous.

“My burden and prayer is to see God raise up a new generation of Baptist believers who truly follow God’s word as their only rule for faith & practice. May God in His rich and wonderful grace give us a harvest of souls and laborers to do the work of taking the gospel to our community and beyond.

The following is from Pastor Bobby Mitchell, Mid-Coast Baptist Church, Brunswick, Maine www.midcoastbaptistchurch.com:

“You may know this, but I am convinced that an important link to the influx of Calvinism among fundamentalists is Ian Paisley and the Free Presbyterians. Dr. Paisley has been introduced to young Baptist men and women for decades at BJU and other schools, now including Crown College. My dad was a student at BJU in the early 1970's. He has told me many times that Paisley was the favorite preacher there. Of course, students bought his books and were influenced further by him.

“My dad can point you to young men that left BJU’s undergraduate programs to enroll in Presbyterian seminaries because of the Paisley influence. Of course, there are Free Presbyterian churches in Greenville, such as the one my dad’s old college friend joined and had his babies sprinkled in. This man left the Baptist ranks because of the Paisley influence at BJU. Another Baptist preacher who I am close to lost his ‘Timothy’ to Presbyterianism after this young man left Ambassador Baptist College and went to BJU for his master’s work. There he was introduced to reformed theology and is now a baby-sprinkler.

“Clarence Sexton had Ian Paisley and other Presbyterians in to preach at his church and school over the last year. I listened via the internet as he introduced Paisley and made light of the fact that he is a Presbyterian and we are Baptists. There was no warning of the fact that the Free Presbyterian church views baptism as a ‘controverted issue’ that is a matter of ‘personal liberty.’ There was no refutation of their Calvinism. As a matter of fact, the Reformers’ portraits line the halls of Temple Baptist Church.

“Because Dr. Paisley is such a tremendous speaker I predict that many of the young preachers training at Crown will become further involved with his books and theology. I will not be surprised to see a battle over Calvinism taking place in the dormitories and classrooms of Crown College in the future.

“He is presented as ‘a Baptist that goes by the label Presbyterian,’ but we know that is not the truth. Dr. Paisley is an avowed Presbyterian. The difference should be defined and clear to Baptists. The pastors and students that I know of who protested the preaching of Paisley and other Presbyterians at a Baptist conference (Temple/Crown) have either been ignored by Pastor Sexton or told things like, ‘don’t be divisive.’

The following is from Pastor Chris Matthews, Smoky Valley Independent Baptist Church --

“I am not certain if this will be what you are looking for or not. These are some observations I have made over time, they are solely my opinions.

“1. Many have turned to Calvinism as an answer to the lactose or nonexistent presentation of repentance in salvation given by most present day IFBs. 1-2-3 repeat after me is the extreme opposite of Calvinism and both are ditches on either side of the narrow way.

“2. Others yet have seen it as the ‘intellectual’ theological view. This is how many on the web present the doctrine,

especially as they speak of the reformers' writings.

“3. Another possibility is that many want to have an excuse to live like the devil and blame the fact that their kids turned out like hellions on ‘my children were not of the elect.’ I don't see this as a conscious decision but a possible reason none the less.

“4. Most have not heard a clear cut presentation on the errors of Calvinism from their pastors and/or church leaders. Nor have they heard the biblical definitions of biblical words that Calvinists pervert.

“5. Many look at Charles Spurgeon as next in line after the trinity and want to be like him. It would be better in my opinion if they would just smoke his cigars instead of choking on his Calvinism.

“6. It is a status symbol to say I am of the elect.

“7. Calvinism's cohorts seem to think that they have a better understanding of God than anybody else.

“8. Possibly the biggest reason is the infiltration of churches by Calvinists. Every now and then you hear about a church into which a family comes and secretly spreads the lie of Calvinism among the people and then leads a church split. This is not just happening in Baptist or fundamental churches, either.

“There are probably many more reasons and even more exceptions to those reasons. We as pastors and preachers need to teach our people the errors of Calvinism and of its torch holders. I have expressed to our congregation that the quickest way for somebody to be removed physically from the premises is for them to propagate the false teachings of Calvinism or Charismaticism.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that Calvinism is increasing among independent Baptists. It is prolific within the General Association of Regular Baptists and is increasing dramatically among Southern Baptists.

As already noted, a chief culprit in the growth of Calvinism is literature. The writings of John Piper and John MacArthur are popular among fundamentalists. The writings of the Puritans and of Charles Spurgeon, who was deeply influenced by the Puritans by his own testimony, also contribute to the growth of Calvinism. On a recent trip to England I had a nice visit with Dr. Peter Masters at Metropolitan Tabernacle. He graciously showed me the various artifacts associated with previous esteemed pastors, particularly Charles Spurgeon and John Gill. Dr. Masters told me that visiting preachers often like to sit in Gill's chair, which is located in a hallway outside of Masters' office; but I told him that I would be afraid that I might catch Gill's Calvinism!

I admire a great many things about Spurgeon and the Puritans and many modern-day Calvinists, but I vehemently disagree with Reformed theology regardless of who teaches it and how much I might agree with them on other matters. I must make an issue of it, because they make an issue of it!

I reject the Quick Prayerism doctrine that is so prevalent among independent Baptists just as vehemently, and I have no doubt that the unscripturalness of this popular evangelistic program and the doctrinal shallowness of many independent Baptist churches and schools has caused some to fall into the arms of Calvinism and its more intellectual approach.

Having studied the Bible earnestly and prayerfully for 34 years and having studied both sides of this issue, I am

convinced that neither Calvinism nor Quick Prayerism is Scriptural.

I have no ill will toward those who differ, and I thank the Lord for every good thing in them; but here I must stand, and I believe it is an issue worth standing for.

For more on this subject see

<http://www.wayoflife.org/database/calvinismheader.html>