

Young, Restless, Reformed

A JOURNALIST'S JOURNEY WITH THE NEW CALVINISTS



COLLIN HANSEN

CROSSWAY BOOKS
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Prologue

Near the beginning of my tenure at *Christianity Today*, the emerging church was all the rage. Editors tended to view this youthful stirring with appropriate skepticism, wondering about the implications of tweaking theology to reach postmodern cultures. Still, emerging leaders such as Brian McLaren built audiences with provocative critiques of modern evangelicalism. After all, emerging Christians are not the only ones who worry that today's church has relaxed standards for holiness and disconnected itself from history. In November 2004 we published a cover story by Andy Crouch, who introduced "The Emergent Mystique." But he did not make many friends within this ill-defined segment when he observed common traits among emerging Christians, such as their careful care for cool hair.

The talk about emerging Christians put me in a difficult spot. As the youngest *CT* editor, I should have known more about this up-and-coming group. On the contrary, I didn't know anyone who was emerging, even though my friends and I had recently experienced the fruits of postmodern relativism in college. We had witnessed the complete breakdown of moral authority and heard apathetic responses to Christian truth claims when we shared from the *Four Spiritual Laws* booklet. Yet we viewed these reactions not as problems with Christianity but as problems with sinners who reject God's grace shown through Jesus Christ.

After one staff discussion about the emerging church, I talked about these experiences with my boss at *CT*. I expressed concern that when *Christianity Today* reports about the emerging church, we might give the impression that this group will become the next wave in evangelicalism. If anything, in my limited sphere I saw a return to traditional Reformed theology. My friends read John Piper's book *Desiring*

God and learned from Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*. They wanted to study at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and sent each other e-mails when they saw good sales for the five-volume set of Charles Spurgeon sermons.

Maybe that was just our little clique in Campus Crusade for Christ at Northwestern University. Or was it? I started thinking about leading seminaries in the United States and noticed a number of Calvinists in leadership positions. I considered millions of books sold by Piper and his yearly appearances at the popular Passion conference. Yale University Press had just released a major biography of Jonathan Edwards. Reformed theology had recently become a major point of contention in the nation's largest Protestant body, the Southern Baptist Convention. Maybe it wasn't just our group.

So I embarked on a nearly two-year journey to discover whether my experiences had been unique or a sign of something bigger. In locales as diverse as Birmingham, Alabama, and New Haven, Connecticut, I sought to find out what makes today's young evangelicals tick. The result should help us learn what tomorrow's church might look like when they become pastors or professors. Even today, common threads in their diverse testimonies will tell the story of God's work in this world.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ground Zero

SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY



It's a good thing I waited to visit Southern Baptist Theological Seminary until after I decided to attend another seminary. Because if I had visited Southern first, I don't think I could have resisted the temptation to commit on the spot just based on the scenery. On a sunny late May afternoon I couldn't stand to do all my interviews inside. So I coaxed Matt Hall into giving me a brief tour around the campus, situated in a leafy, lazy section of Louisville. I met Matt, a twenty-seven-year-old former Southern student, in the foyer of Norton Hall. The striking campus centerpiece resembles the stately red-brick churches that Southern's graduates will pastor. It's the kind of academic building that looks perfect on a sentimental appeal for alumni donations.

We headed outside and walked to the Honeycutt Campus Center, a vibrant student facility more suited to undergraduate fun than seminary studies. Thanks to its namesake, the Honeycutt Center also reminds students of the president whose retirement in the early 1990s unleashed a controversy that would nearly kill the seminary. Yet Al Mohler, Honeycutt's successor, has guided Southern from the brink of destruction to its current flourishing state—it is the Southern Baptist Convention's largest seminary.

Inside Honeycutt, Matt showed me around the campus bookstore. Here the seminary's unique character became most apparent. Right away I noticed a prominent display of John MacArthur commentaries. The noted Calvinist expositor does not belong to the SBC. Nearby, copies of *By His Grace and For His Glory* were piled up on a table. Written

by Southern Seminary history professor Tom Nettles, this book stirred Calvinists to defend their theology with appeals to SBC founders.

Finally, we headed back to Norton Hall and walked to the second floor, where we could find a room to talk. With the building abandoned before Memorial Day, we lingered in Mohler's receiving room. He had invested good money to renovate this part of the building a few years ago. When contrasted with John Piper's home and Bethlehem Baptist Church, I understand why Piper can't let a visit to Southern go by without warning against the comfort encouraged by the seminary's relative opulence. Prominent portraits of famed London pastor Charles Spurgeon and the first Southern president, James P. Boyce, hung on the wall. One day, when Mohler is gone, he may look down from that wall on Southern's next president.

Done with the receiving room, we slipped back into the new studio where Mohler records his daily radio show. Matt now works for Salem Communications, which distributes the program to sixty-two stations nationwide. Mohler is many things to many people—champion of inerrancy who cleared house at Southern, advocate for Calvinism, bibliophile known for untiring work habits. But most know him as a conservative commentator who pops up frequently on CNN with Larry King or on the *Washington Post* web site offering his opinions about breaking news.

Matt makes Mohler's radio program happen. But Southern once seemed an unlikely destination for Matt. A missionary kid, Matt grew up giving top priority to evangelism and considered theology to be divisive. Why bother with theology, Matt figured, because we'll never figure out most debated issues anyway.

College courses gently challenged Matt's assumptions. He took a class on Luther and Calvin at Grove City College and loved it. Their thoughtfulness impressed him. Through their writing he felt like he could experience momentous historical changes. The great Reformers even won him over to their belief that God sovereignly elects his church. Still, Matt's upbringing in seeker-sensitive churches made him wary of labels such as Calvinism. He associated the term with the "frozen chosen."

His reluctance only receded later in college. During the summer

of 2001, Matt interned at a large nondenominational church in the Pittsburgh area. The staff asked him to start a ministry for college students and young adults. Searching on the Web for appropriate music, he stumbled upon Passion. He liked what he heard. Through a connection he even arranged for his church to host Louie Giglio on a Passion tour. Giglio's passion for the glory of God struck a nerve with Matt. Giglio cast a vision bigger than what Matt heard in sermons, which had titles like "Seven Easy Ways to Minimize Stress in Your Life." Through Passion, Matt also learned about Piper. He returned to the Web and found endless Piper resources on the Desiring God web site. Matt devoured *The Pleasures of God*, in which Piper describes God's delight in his own glory.

After college Matt prepared to pursue his ministry calling in seminary. A pastor friend recommended Southern. Matt had never heard of Mohler, but he loved the combination of Baptist Calvinism. The gamble paid off. Done with two master's degrees, Matt is now pursuing a PhD in American religious history.

Yet as Matt's views continued to change at Southern, he learned to avoid discussions about Calvinism with his pastor dad. It's not so much the theology his father worries about. It's the implications. Matt began airing his growing concerns about other evangelical theologies when he started blogging in 2003. Not long before I sat down with Matt, he talked with his dad about the critiques posted on his blog. His dad reminded him to balance his passion for biblical truth with a gracious spirit.

"A different generation of evangelicals that includes my dad is not as concerned about my theology," Matt said. "But they would perceive my criticism of elements within evangelicalism as damaging to the cause."

In order to understand why this might be, you need to know a little "history." After World War II, Southern Baptists such as Billy Graham and Carl Henry encouraged evangelicals to engage culture with their conservative theology. Graham preached to presidents and music stars. Henry issued a stirring call with his book *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. They published a magazine together (*Christianity Today*). These leaders believed their third way

would prove more faithful than that of the liberals, more fruitful than that of the fundamentalists. In many ways, their plan worked. Their success has afforded today's up-and-coming evangelicals a measure of theological introspection. But elder generations don't always appreciate or understand the resulting self-criticism.

R. Albert Mohler Jr. was too young to head the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He thought so. Everyone thought so. Well, not everyone. The board was impressed by his vitality and plan to restore the seminary's confessional identity. During his first convocation as president in 1993, Mohler—thirty-three years old at the time—addressed students and faculty with a talk entitled “Don't Just Do Something: Stand There!” They soon learned what the board saw in Mohler. Not prone to ambiguity, Mohler let the faculty know where he stood by quoting James P. Boyce: “It is no hardship to those who teach here to be called upon to sign the declaration of their principles, for there are fields of usefulness open elsewhere to every man, and none need accept your call who cannot conscientiously sign your formulary.”

When Mohler stepped into that chapel pulpit, nearly the entire faculty opposed his agenda. They had good reason to fear him. The board tapped Mohler to bring the conservative resurgence to Southern, which at that point still harbored moderate and liberal professors who didn't endorse the denomination's inerrancy litmus test. No more of that with Mohler in charge. No less than 96 percent of the seminary's faculty left when Mohler took over and solidified his authority with the trustees' backing. Not that many of the faculty had a choice.

“I said, in sum, if this is what you believe, then we want you to stay. If not, then you have come here under false pretenses, and you must go,” Mohler, now forty-eight, said. “As they would say, the battle was joined.”

What a battle it would be. Southern, nearly a hundred and fifty years old, has been a vital part of Louisville's church life. Mohler faced not only a hostile faculty but an embittered city, including Southern graduates who filled the city's pulpits. To this day he had best avoid some Louisville churches. Television cameras once hindered him from entering his office. News helicopters drowned out telephone

conversations. Students camped outside his office singing, “We Shall Overcome.” Candlelight vigils carried on live television protested Mohler’s leadership.

All this because he reenforced Southern’s Abstract of Principles, derived via the Second London Confession from that landmark Reformed document, the Westminster Confession. Due mostly to this foundation, Mohler saw that the seminary had a “heritage to be reclaimed, and I felt a deep personal commitment to that heritage.” Indeed, Mohler earned his MDiv and PhD from Southern. However, back then he identified with Southern’s liberal wing for a time. Needless to say, something changed.

“One would have to have a providential understanding of history to look back to 1993 and see the events that brought about my election as president and what that might have meant for the future of one part of evangelicalism,” Mohler said.

But some of Mohler’s inerrancy allies might not have fully foreseen one small twist. Mohler’s fidelity to the Abstract of Principles has steered the seminary back toward Calvinism. On providence, the abstract reads, “God from eternity, decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs and governs all creatures and all events.”

God elects without condition, the abstract says. “Election is God’s eternal choice of some persons unto everlasting life—not because of foreseen merit in them, but of his mere mercy in Christ.” Sovereign grace overcomes human resistance. “Regeneration is a change of heart, wrought by the Holy Spirit, who quickeneth the dead in trespasses and sins enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the Word of God and renewing their whole nature, so that they love and practice holiness. It is a work of God’s free and special grace alone.”

When Mohler asked Southern’s faculty to teach according to the abstract, the seminary nearly collapsed. Less than fifteen years later, Mohler has attracted one of the strongest evangelical faculties in the country. Though only one of six denominational seminaries, one in four SBC seminarians attends Southern. Southern administrators happily point out that their seminary charges a fraction of what similar seminaries collect in tuition and fees. Enrollment has surged to more

than 4,300 students—which makes Southern the largest Southern Baptist seminary, likely the largest U.S. seminary period. Many of these graduates will take Calvinism to pulpits throughout the SBC.

Not that Mohler would suppose that he can or should Calvinize the Convention. When hired at Southern, Mohler dealt with critics who opposed not only his views on election but also his belief in a literal resurrection. The denomination did and does have bigger problems than Calvinism. Mohler may get another platform to address these issues as an announced candidate for SBC president in 2008.

“When I say that my agenda is not Calvinism, I say that with unfeigned honesty, with undiluted candor,” Mohler told me. “My agenda is the gospel. And I refuse to limit that to a label, but I am also very honest to say, yes, that means I am a five-point Calvinist. If you’re counting points, here I am.”

Such a profession hardly placates Mohler’s critics. In today’s SBC, even honesty is controversial.

Neither side trusts a 2006 survey from LifeWay Research indicating that 10 percent of SBC pastors consider themselves to be five-point Calvinists. Non-Calvinists think even that number is exaggerated. Calvinists believe they claim a larger percentage.

Indeed, a November 2007 Lifeway Study showed that nearly 30 percent of SBC seminary graduates between 1998 and 2004, now serving as pastors, describe themselves as Calvinists.

Today’s trends recall the convention’s origins. For much of the SBC’s formative years, Calvinists did claim a sizable following. Evidence from the Convention’s early years points to Calvinist near-dominance. Most early American Baptists took after England’s Particular Baptists, so named because they believed in particular redemption, also known as limited atonement. The Calvinists in New England may have exiled Roger Williams, a Baptist, but the founder of Rhode Island shared their views on election.

To learn more about Southern Baptist history, I went straight to one of the top sources. I met Tom Nettles, Southern Seminary professor of historical theology, in downtown Louisville and talked over plates of hot brown. I struggled to finish this filling, tasty Louisville treat,

which as far as I could tell consisted of hot turkey suffocated by layers of cheese. Nettles labored through a vicious cold to recap the history recounted in his 1986 book, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life*.

In his study of Southern Baptist history, Nettles discovered that Calvinism typified the Convention's written record from its founding in 1845 through the first decade of the twentieth century. America's first published Baptist theologian, John L. Dagg, taught the doctrines of grace. The same goes for James P. Boyce, the Princeton-trained founder and first president of Southern Seminary. "I wrote the book as a personal exercise of convincing myself that I was not off my rocker," Nettles said. But that's exactly what some others think of Nettles. Calvinism cost Nettles a previous job at Mid-American Baptist Seminary.

Southern Baptists crept closer to their modern-day reputation during the tenure of E. Y. Mullins, president of Southern Seminary from 1899 to 1928. Mullins distrusted theological confessions. For many years, Southern Baptists have rallied around the call for "no creed but the Bible, no cause but Christ."

Calvinism began to be seen as too systematic, as if it imposed a foreign meaning on the biblical text. But the decreasing reliance on confessions also allowed liberalism to develop within the Convention. Individualism encouraged by Mullins's anti-confessional approach undermined SBC unity, according to Nettles. Hence the need for a conservative resurgence, which began in 1979 with non-Calvinists such as Adrian Rogers maneuvering to oust leaders who would not affirm biblical inerrancy.

"They had to fight like mad just to keep their head above water on the authority of Scripture," Nettles said. "They didn't have time to develop a systematic theology."

They also needed to find conservatives to fill all the positions opening in seminaries. Calvinists, with their strong inerrancy credentials, emerged as leading candidates. The chief example was Al Mohler at Southern Seminary.

"I saw his selection as providential," Nettles said. "I saw it as something that could not be generated by any human instrument. God

himself was doing something that we could never have thought of twenty years ago.”

Mohler has silenced critics who said he could never find a first-class faculty to affirm inerrancy. Now it's not ridiculous to think that if Mohler leads Southern as long as Mullins did, he might leave behind the opposite theological legacy.

That's precisely what many in the Convention today fear. As early as 1997 Southern Baptist historian William Estep warned, “If the Calvinizing of Southern Baptists continues unabated, we are in danger of becoming ‘a perfect dunghill’ in American society.” Estep's warning does not seem to have produced the intended effect. Numerous web sites run by Calvinists have reproduced his article as Exhibit A in the war against Calvinists. Forgive them if they feel a little defensive. Estep also wrote, “Calvinism's God resembles Allah, the god of Islam, more than the God of grace and redeeming love revealed in Jesus Christ.”¹

The alarm has been sounded. Could today's debates over Calvinism help unleash a battle that will make the conservative resurgence seem like a skirmish? Malcom Yarnell, assistant dean for theological studies at Southwestern Seminary, seems to think so. “The Controversy or Conservative Resurgence of the late 20th century is a mere precursor to the battles for theological integrity which face us, some of which will make that episode look like child's play.”²

Mohler himself hinted at rough water ahead in his famous first convocation as Southern president. Inerrancy will give way to bigger controversies, he said. Mohler warned that the SBC was flirting with forfeiting its theological heritage. The Calvinism debate presages the trouble unleashed when modern-day Southern Baptists confront confessionalism of any sort.

“This crisis far outweighs the [inerrancy] controversy that had marked the Southern Baptist Convention for the last fourteen years,” Mohler said. “That controversy is a symptom rather than the root cause. As Southern Baptists, we are in danger of becoming God's most

¹William R. Estep, “Doctrines Lead to ‘Dunghill,’ Prof Warns,” *The Founders Journal*, Summer 1997; <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ29/article1.html>.

²Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “The Heart of a Baptist,” White Paper 2 (Fort Worth: Center for Theological Research, December 2005); http://www.baptisttheology.org/documents/TheHeartofaBaptist_001.pdf.

unembarrassed pragmatists—much more enamored with statistics than invested with theological substance.”

The question is whether Southern Baptists can weather their intramural fights without weakening each other so much that they encourage a liberal relapse. But that’s a risk worth taking for some frustrated Southern Baptists.

“The conservatives have been in charge now for a couple of decades, and our convention is no better off on basic issues than when the liberals were running things,” said Tom Ascol, pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida. He also serves as executive director of Founders Ministries, launched in 1982 to reform local churches through a return to the Convention’s Calvinist roots. “That’s because inerrancy isn’t enough. We have to actually understand and apply what the Bible says. The conservatives thump the Bible but are unwilling to just obey the Bible in the most basic ways. How can you be an inerrantist and not practice [church discipline according to] Matthew 18? You might as well be a liberal. What difference does it make?”

For someone who says he doesn’t want to stir controversies, Timmy Brister often finds himself in the middle of them. His blog writing doesn’t endear him to the executives at Southern Seminary, where he is preparing for pastoral ministry. He gives seminary leaders an earful when they welcome chapel speakers who have elsewhere derided Calvinism.

“It bothers me that I get reprimanded for doing the very thing I’m taught to do,” said Timmy, twenty-eight.

I was glad to catch Timmy in the morning when he didn’t have to work. He works third shift for UPS in Louisville so he can get to know college students and share the gospel. We enjoyed a spirited chat about his eventful life so far with the SBC. One half of Timmy’s family background marks him as an SBC lifer. His grandfather graduated from Southern Seminary in 1943, and his dad joined the Baptist Student Union at Ole Miss. That’s where one half met the other half of his family. That side is a whole other story. His Assyrian mother fled Iran after her father died in a car accident and could no longer defend their Christian enclave.

Far from the troubles of revolutionary Iran, Timmy grew up as a jock in Athens, Alabama. He still looks like he could play a smooth shortstop. Before college he had never read any book but the Bible. But boy, did he love reading the Bible. Timmy's passions make sense when he describes the biggest influence on his life, an elderly man who led his Bible study in high school. The man who generously shared his time with Timmy died of a heart attack while preaching in prison.

By that time Timmy had moved to south Alabama to attend the University of Mobile. He chose Mobile over another Baptist school, Samford University in Birmingham, because Samford sided with the moderates who opposed the conservative resurgence. At Mobile, Timmy encountered a strong Reformed movement. But like so many others, he didn't find much appealing about these Calvinists. They told him God would never use him unless he embraced five-point Calvinism, Timmy remembered.

"I looked around at these guys, and I just noticed that they didn't have that same passion," Timmy said. "Even though I didn't have the theology and head knowledge they had, they didn't have the heart that I had."

Circumstances nudged Timmy toward Reformed theology. He was fired from his first church internship, working for an SBC church in Mobile that ranked among the state leaders in baptisms. The pastors there took the CEO ministry model a little too literally, according to Timmy. They spent work hours day-trading stocks, he said. So he wasn't happy when the pastors refused to approve a modest budget he proposed for college ministry. Timmy managed to obtain a copy of the church budget and confronted the staff about their expensive pet projects. Two pastors sat him down for three hours to express their displeasure.

"They called me Absalom," he said, referring to King David's rebellious son. "They told me that I was a no-good, unprofitable servant, that God would never use me in ministry, and that I was a waste of their time and that I could no longer come back to that church." This scenario would sound ridiculous if I hadn't heard similar stories off the record from other young Southern Baptist pastors.

After his first ministry experience, Timmy was pretty sure he

wanted nothing to do with churches. He wanted to die anonymously on the mission field. That option sounded especially appealing when his fiancée broke off their engagement and told Timmy she had been cheating on him.

“So the love of my life and my love for the church, the two biggest things in my life, were completely rocked,” Timmy said. “I felt like every foundation on which I stood was broken, and all I had left to stand on was what I knew to be true—my Savior, my God, and his control of my life.”

God graciously provided sweet fellowship through the Word and the Holy Spirit’s comfort in his brokenness. Around this same time Timmy started reading about Reformed theology. He heard Piper speak in 2000 at a Christmas conference for Campus Outreach. Timmy has practically memorized Piper’s four messages after listening to each one at least fifty times. In one address Piper taught about enjoying God through suffering and giving your life in service to him. After that conference Timmy began devouring Piper’s books and other Calvinist works.

Timmy moved closer to home after college and began working in student ministry for a church. Just twenty-one years old, Timmy bought a house and planned to live the rest of his life there. But during his fourth year Timmy led a staff devotional by reading from Piper’s *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*. The staff didn’t appreciate what Timmy implied by reading from Piper’s critique of a professional view of pastoral ministry. Timmy said he just wanted to warn them based on his Mobile experience. Still, Timmy did see some parallels. If I had tried to reach him by phone at that three-hundred-member church, Timmy said, I would have first spoken with two secretaries and one intern before I ever caught him. So maybe the devotional hit a little too close to home. The church suspended Timmy for one week without pay. At that point Timmy decided he needed to go to seminary. Timmy expects to either plant his own SBC church or join a Calvinist pastoral staff when he graduates.

Church planting might be the best way to avoid the “tumultuous days” ahead, warned about in 2006 by SBC president Frank Page. Page observed that hundreds of Calvinists graduating from SBC seminaries

have to find jobs somewhere. But if Timmy's experience is any indication, some Southern Baptist churches have problems greater than Calvinism.

Nearly every Southern Baptist source I reached on both sides of the Calvinism debate cited Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama. This venerable church has hosted three SBC presidents in more than one hundred years. Maybe that's why Steve Lawson was an odd choice to pastor Dauphin Way. When church leaders came calling, Lawson pastored a small, nondenominational Bible church in Little Rock, Arkansas. But they heard from the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, which often employed Lawson to train pastors, that he would admirably fill their pulpit for a week as they searched for a lead pastor. Once Lawson preached as a guest, church leaders didn't want him to leave. They observed his considerable gift for expository preaching, the likes of which they hadn't seen since Jerry Vines, one of the SBC presidents who once filled their pulpit.

Before he answered the call, Lawson wanted to clear his conscience about one potential problem. He asked church leaders what they believed about predestination. According to Lawson, they told him they had never heard a sermon about predestination. He briefly explained to the leaders his own view, commonly associated with Calvinism, but he used only biblical terms. Still, the church might have discerned his allegiances since he earned his DMin from Reformed Theological Seminary. Lawson said the pulpit committee indicated they would like to hear him preach about predestination sometime.

Maybe Dauphin Way should have stuck to the SBC farm system. After Lawson moved to Mobile in 1995, he waited two years before he preached about God's sovereignty. Despite the committee's initial reaction, he figured the doctrines of grace might not go down smoothly with Dauphin Way.

"I could've said a word in Russian they could have more quickly understood than *Calvinism*," Lawson told me. "Their biblical literacy was amazingly low. Many people weren't even bringing Bibles to church."

Lawson had problems at Dauphin Way from the get-go. Within

those first two years, one group left Dauphin Way to start its own church. He attributed this first fissure to his expository preaching. The proclaimed Word exposed hearts, he said. It revealed that some church leaders didn't believe what they claimed. Lawson told me about one sixty-five-year-old deacon who approached him privately and asked how he could be saved. According to Lawson, nearly one hundred adult church members professed faith for the first time during his eight-year tenure.

Only his commitment to those adult converts kept him from resigning much earlier during a series of contentious fights, Lawson explained. In more than two hours on the phone, Lawson spoke freely about the events that have made him the chief target for non-Calvinists who fear that Reformed theology will split the SBC. Lawson spoke with complete confidence that he had done the right thing at Dauphin Way. According to press reports when he resigned in 2003, attendance at Dauphin Way declined from more than fifteen hundred in 1996 to about six hundred and fifty. Church membership dropped from seven thousand to three thousand, though Lawson says these figures are exaggerated. Either way, the conflict was dramatic.

"I refer to it as the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, and Gulf War I," Lawson told me about his fights with the church. "It was Gulf War II that got me."

Gulf War II for Lawson was Calvinism. But it says much about today's denominational politics that so many believe Calvinism split Dauphin Way. Other factors probably played a larger role. In one instance, Lawson told me, a woman who had donated one million dollars for the church building asked Lawson to remarry her after her husband died. Lawson refused because her fiancée belonged to the Church of Christ, which Lawson said teaches a false gospel of regeneration by baptism.

In another case Lawson learned that two choir members lived together. He proceeded with church discipline and confronted them. They didn't appreciate his inquiry. So he returned with a couple of witnesses. When that attempt failed, he approached their Sunday school department. But their friends in the church backed them against Lawson. Undaunted, the next time the church took Communion,

Lawson announced that the two choir members would not be invited to partake.

Lawson finally surrendered in 2003. Two days before Christmas 2002, Lawson said, every church member received an anonymous letter in the mail. A card inside asked, “Are you a Baptist or are you a Calvinist?” The letter invited members to check the appropriate box and remit the card. The group behind the letter sent a copy to local media. That’s when Lawson knew he could not continue. The entire church staff left with him, along with forty-one of forty-eight deacons.

“Steve had no reason to resign,” said Rick Melson, then minister of music and worship. “He really shouldn’t have resigned. He was faithfully leading that church.”

The remnant who supported Lawson formed the core of his new church, Christ Fellowship Baptist Church in Mobile. He did not plan to start a church, especially not in Mobile. But the members who left Dauphin Way with him asked Lawson to give one last sermon. They rented a warehouse, and four hundred people showed up that first Sunday. In his new church, Lawson preaches the doctrines of grace without reservation.

Lawson told me he never used the word *Calvinism* in eight years at Dauphin Way. “I simply tried to use biblical language drawn from the biblical text to establish these truths,” he said. “In many ways, this made for even stronger preaching because it used the language of God’s Word itself.”

Yet Dauphin Way responded ferociously when he preached through John 17 (particularly verse 6: “I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.”). Before he preached on Romans 8:29 (“For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brothers”), the chairman of the deacon board—one of the most powerful men in town—warned Lawson not to continue. The chairman said the sermon would divide the church. “Better to be divided by truth than united in error,” Lawson responded. He never saw the deacon again.

Lawson can cite chapter and verse with the best and exudes confidence in his ability to understand and explain the Word. Not surprisingly, Lawson has found solace in pastors who have endured great tumult, including John Calvin, Charles Spurgeon, and especially Jonathan Edwards.

“All of these great men have paid a great price,” he said. “Suddenly I realized that I’m in a long line of godly men. To deny these truths would be to step out of this line.”

Reading press reports about Dauphin Way’s split, Lawson does indeed sound like Edwards. One pastor who stepped in after Lawson resigned said the church would have given him more support “if he had a more compassionate spirit and related more to people. He was distant . . . from everything in the church except preaching.”

I asked Lawson if he would have acted differently in retrospect. Without hesitation he said no. “I don’t mean to say I’m perfect,” Lawson said. “By that I mean that I believe in the sovereign providence of God. God ordered my steps to come to Dauphin Way. God brought me to that church to preach his Word as an expression of his mercy and grace.”

But he definitely doesn’t recommend that other Reformed pastors should accept calls to lead Southern Baptist churches that do not share their Calvinist convictions. The Church of England ejected the Puritans, Lawson reminded me. Luther couldn’t reform the Roman Catholic Church. Mohler may have turned around Southern, but he could fire faculty, so long as the trustees supported him. A pastor has the authority to hire his secretary and janitor.

“You only have one life to live,” Lawson says to young pastors. “Do you want to drive a car that when you push on the gas pedal, someone else steps on the brake?”

Retired Southern Baptist pastor and convention president Jerry Vines did not mention Dauphin Way by name in October 2006 while preaching at a Georgia church, warning against the danger of Calvinism. He didn’t need to. Vines offered his own reasons for the resurgence. He cited a reaction to the “weak commitment of seeker-friendly theology” on the one hand and dead churches on the other.

He also attributed the resurgence to conferences with popular and articulate Calvinist spokesmen.

Vines stoked his audience with a story about one good Baptist youth who grew up in Vines's Jacksonville church and attended a non-SBC college. There he embraced Reformed theology and later earned a PhD. For a time this man taught at an SBC seminary. But eventually the subject of Vines's parable left the SBC altogether for a Reformed seminary. To the audience's horror, Vines said that this man now baptizes infants.

In June 2007 every SBC church in Florida received a free DVD of Vines's message. Vines assured me that no money collected from the state's churches had been used to pay for postage. But he said that even if those funds had been tapped, that would be no different from his money funding Calvinist professors at SBC seminaries. The resurgence of Calvinism in the SBC deserves a spirited response, Vines told me that month.

"I have preached for John MacArthur. I preach up at Southern Seminary. I delivered Mohler's lectures on preaching this March and had great fellowship there. I've had Calvinists through the years preach for me. It's never been a problem," Vines said. "We're having a problem today because there's a small group of hostile, aggressive, militant Calvinists. They kill evangelism, and they kill churches. And they do it without integrity when they come in under the radar and the people don't know up front where they are theologically."

Does this militant group include Founders Ministries? "Yes," Vines responded.

If Vines is correct, can anything forestall more church splits or even a convention split? Bill Harrell, chairman of the SBC executive committee, likewise faulted some Calvinists for undermining SBC churches.

"If a man wants to answer a call to a Calvinistic church he should have the freedom to do that," Harrell told *The Christian Index* in 2006, "but that man should not answer a call to a church that is not Calvinistic, neglect to tell them his leanings, and then surreptitiously lead them to become a Calvinistic church."³

³J. Gerald Harris, "Martinez Pastor on National Stage Representing Georgia Baptists," *The Christian Index*, October 26, 2006; <http://www.christianindex.org/2715.article>.

I asked leading SBC Calvinists—including Tom Ascol from Founders Ministries—about these charges. No one condoned dishonesty. Certainly no one confessed a desire to thwart evangelism or derail churches. But many asked how they could be expected to explain Calvinism to congregations that don't understand the term. Many Southern Baptists who think they do understand probably conflate Calvinism with hyper-Calvinism, as do some leading SBC academics and pastors.

"They have put us in a no-win position," Ascol said. "If we go in with cards on the table and say we're five-point Calvinists, then we get accused of pushing our Calvinism. But if we go in and say we want to teach the Bible and we're confessional, they say we're deceitful because we didn't mention Calvinism."

Tom Schreiner teaches New Testament at Southern and preaches at Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville. What would he do? "If a church asked me, 'Are you a Calvinist?' I'd say, 'Yes, but I don't use the word *Calvinism*. I teach what Scripture says, and I explain it in terms of biblical theology, what the Bible as a whole is teaching, the framework of Scripture. That's what I want to teach this congregation. I want this church not to be a Calvinistic church but a biblical church. Now I think there's a lot of overlap there biblically. But we're not indebted to John Calvin; we're indebted to the Scriptures at the end of the day.'"

"It is simple in the sense that you go into a church and you teach the Scriptures and you love the people," Schreiner said. "That sounds easy, but it's hard. You have to be patient. You can't expect to turn things around quickly. It doesn't always succeed. Maybe the church is so immature that they kick you out. Maybe you're so immature that you get kicked out."

Debates about Calvinism in the SBC have much to do with the convention's original purpose. The SBC organized in 1845 to facilitate evangelism and missions. Some non-Calvinists fear that if Baptists believe God predestines the elect, they will lose their motivation to share their faith.

"If one does follow the logic of Calvinism, then a missionary or

evangelistic spirit is unnecessary," SBC president Frank Page wrote in his 2000 book, *Trouble with the TULIP*.

This fear dogs Calvinists despite their track record of zealous evangelists, including George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, William Carey, and Adoniram Judson. Spurgeon and Carey, at least, did face opposition from hyper-Calvinists, who say Christians should not presume upon God's sovereignty by offering the gospel to anyone who would hear. I asked Page about his comment about Calvinism and evangelistic spirit. Would he change anything if he wrote the book today? He would be less strident about some comments, Page assured me, including the sentence I quoted.

"That's a good place where I should have pointed out that I was referring there to the hyper and/or extreme forms of Calvinism, which in many cases does dull one's evangelistic passion," Page said. "Most of the lack of passion for evangelism in the SBC comes from non-Calvinist churches."

Page can't claim the SBC's most provocative comments about Calvinism. Those might belong to Steve Lemke, provost of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. "I believe that [Calvinism] is potentially the most explosive and divisive issue facing us in the near future," he warned in 2005. "It has already been an issue that has split literally dozens of churches, and it holds the potential to split the entire convention."

Lemke sees the rising generation of Southern Baptist ministers as "the most Calvinist we have had in several generations." He doubts that Calvinism has yet reached its high-water mark in the SBC. And that spells trouble, according to Lemke. Baptism and membership figures, he said, show that Founders churches lack commitment to evangelism.

"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," Lemke explained. He told me that growing up, he learned that Christians have blood on their hands if they do not share their faith. That personal responsibility for the eternal destiny of

friends and family should drive Christians to evangelize, Lemke told me. By itself, love for God doesn't suffice as motivation.

Fisher Humphreys, a former Lemke colleague, has the kind of southern name that begs for a drawl. He taught at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary before moving to Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. His books have been sent to pastors throughout the South as resources they can use to oppose Calvinism. He graciously invited me to his townhouse, where we talked through tough issues with the formality and collegiality only possible in the South. His gentlemanly tone made it possible for us to enjoy a conversation that could have otherwise become quite tense.

"Southern Baptists are very committed to this motivation: If we tell them, they can be saved. And if we don't, they can't," Humphreys said. He argued that the move away from Calvinism during the twentieth century coincided with missionary expansion. The more Christians evangelize, the less Calvinist they become, he said.

"If God did predestine, the problem you face is the universal love of God for all people," he said. "If there's anything that I believe more deeply than everything else, it is that the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—loves every person on this planet, and that means he wants the best for them and would never predestine that some of them be damned.

"If I became convinced of predestination, then I would be a universalist, because I'm so utterly convinced that there's nobody on this planet God doesn't love and want the best for," he continued. "So if I became convinced that people are saved by God predestining them, then he would predestine everybody."

Humphreys directed me toward one of his books. In it he says that the Bible contains two sets of verses, some emphasizing God's sovereignty and others focusing on God's love. For Humphreys, every other Bible verse must submit to his interpretation of John 3:16. "I'm so persuaded that God loves everybody that I can't take Romans 9 at face value where God says, 'Esau have I hated,'" Humphreys said.

Isn't this an inadequate way to study the Bible? The false dichotomy produces a predetermined result. Who would choose a theological system over John 3:16? Would any Baptist choose predestination

over “for God so loved the world”? Of course, they don’t need to make that choice. The Bible doesn’t let us off the hook that easily. John 3:16 must stand beside John 3:27—“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven.”

Humanly speaking, God’s sovereignty seems to threaten human responsibility. But Scripture affirms both truths. Even when we don’t understand, we can thank God that he does not limit himself according to our understanding. God gives Christians all the motivation they need to share their faith. We evangelize for God and his glory, out of love for our neighbors. We have confidence because there is no greater evangelist than the Holy Spirit.

“Reformed theology rightly understood is empowering. It is anything but pacifying,” said Bruce Ware, theology professor at Southern Seminary. “This is the great fear in the SBC among the non-Calvinist majority, that this theology will squelch missions. The fact is, Southern Seminary is sending more graduates to the International Mission Board than any other seminary.”

I’m not sure if Bradley Cochran has plans to serve overseas as a missionary. But the Southern Seminary student definitely has a passion for the gospel. As we talked in Louisville, Bradley confirmed for me that when God changes the inside, he often leaves the outside as is. He spoke thoughtfully about the appeal of Calvinism. He handed me a list of the leading Reformed influences for young pastors. We reflected on how the doctrines of grace actually embolden evangelism.

To be honest, I felt somewhat disoriented in our conversation. Bradley, twenty-five, did not speak with the smooth, refined drawl of Louisville’s educated aristocracy. His unmistakable sharp twang hinted at a rural southern upbringing. With his shaved head and facial hair, he looked less like the clean-cut graduate students I had met and more like someone who struggled to graduate from high school.

What I saw was exactly what Bradley had been. He grew up attending a mainline church with his family in rural Kentucky. But he considered Sundays to be the worst day of the week. Following his older brother’s lead, he quit going to church, passing time with other activities instead. By age fifteen he had racked up a police rap

sheet and developed a drug problem. By age twenty he suffered severe depression.

In God's providence, these troubles softened Cochran's heart to the gospel. His fiancée's sister led a Bible study for youths caught up in tough lifestyles. There he became worried about the state of his soul. For two months he wavered back and forth about the gospel. Finally, after drugs killed a friend, "God granted me open eyes to see the severity of my sins," Bradley said. Immediately he cast away the signs of his previous life—he ripped down his posters, tossed out his music, threw away his marijuana, poured out his booze, and called off his engagement. He also got the heck out of his small Kentucky town. Eager for a Christian environment, he enrolled at Liberty University.

He learned about predestination when a classmate loaned him some R. C. Sproul lectures and books. You wouldn't expect a Liberty student to sympathize with Calvinism. In April 2007 Liberty founder Jerry Falwell called limited atonement a heresy. Ergun Caner, president of Liberty Theological Seminary, decried the "Calvinist Jihad" in 2006 and said Calvinists are worse than Muslims. Indeed, Bradley did not at first consider predestination to be just. But the second time he read the Sproul material, things clicked, Brad told me, snapping his fingers.

"Once I bought into the doctrine of predestination, the rest of [Calvinism] was there in seed form," he said. "I had already submitted to the idea that God could do whatever he wanted with our souls and be just."

Before Bradley even understood the rest of Calvinism, fellow students began criticizing him. Those challenges only intensified his study of Reformed theology. Cochran bolstered his arguments by boasting that he had never even read Calvin. He confessed to me that he didn't handle the debates with utmost maturity, though he did persuade many to agree with him.

"I felt like Calvinism was more than abstract points of theology," Bradley said. "I felt you would get a much bigger view of God if you accepted these things, an understanding of justice and grace that would so deepen your affections for God, that would make you so much more grateful for his grace."

Even when Bradley could not explain his beliefs, he lived them. As

with SBC debates, Bradley's critics argued that Calvinists lack motivation to share their faith since they believe God has predestined some to eternal life.

"I got an evangelism award at Liberty, so no one could say that about me," he said. "My passion for evangelism only intensified with Calvinism."

Almost every Reformed pastor I interviewed bragged about how much money his church gives to missions. That's one thing they will gladly boast about, because they can recognize their church members for generosity.

"There's not a Baptist church in Jackson that gives as much money to missions as First Pres. And there are Baptist churches a lot bigger than we are," said Ligon Duncan, senior minister of First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi. "So I think in the Presbyterian Church in America there has been from the beginning a desire from our founding fathers to be Reformed and to show the world that we do not worry in the back of our minds at night about the free offer of the gospel."

The written record alone should silence critics who blame Calvinism for missionary failures.⁴ John Piper calls *Let the Nations Be Glad!* "the biggest surprise I've ever written." Hardly any missions course or training program can neglect this modern classic, in which Piper famously declares, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't."⁵ J. I. Packer's *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, written in 1961, has helped thousands of Christians understand the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Tullian Tchividjian, a PCA pastor in Florida, counts as a prized possession a well-worn, first-edition copy of the book, which he plucked off his grandfather's shelf. Tullian likes to think about how the book might have affected the ministry of his grandfather, Billy Graham.

In the book Packer warns his fellow Reformed believers, "We should not be held back by the thought that if they are not elect, they

⁴Consider also Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel to the Whole Person by Whole People*, revised and expanded edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

⁵John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 17.

will not believe us, and our efforts to convert them will fail. That is true; but it is none of our business, and should make no difference to our action."⁶

Packer certainly does not see why trust in God's sovereignty should stifle evangelism. "Were it not for the sovereign grace of God, evangelism would be the most futile and useless enterprise that the world has ever seen, and there would be no more complete waste of time under the sun than to preach the Christian gospel."⁷

Packer makes a compelling appeal to experience in order to prove that Christians trust in God's sovereignty in salvation. In their prayers Christians thank God for leading them to faith, and they ask God to lead their unbelieving friends and family to faith. "You have never for one moment supposed that the decisive contribution to your salvation was yours and not God's."⁸

No one wants to worry about evangelism and God's sovereignty when they see their churches growing. But what happens when no one responds to the gospel call? At this point Calvinists and Arminians may disagree. Packer offers four guidelines: (1) No one can orchestrate revival. (2) It's not surprising when depraved men and women reject the gospel. (3) Jesus commands us to be faithful and does not promise success. (4) God is our only hope. This truth should not make us complacent. That's not how the apostle Paul responded. "He knew that wherever the word of the gospel went, God would raise the dead. He knew that the word would prove a savor of life to some of those who heard it. This knowledge made him confident, tireless, and expectant in his evangelism."⁹ Likewise, Christians should be bold yet patient, praying continually. "God will make us pray before he blesses our labors in order that we may constantly learn afresh that we depend on God for everything."¹⁰

The argument that Calvinists do not evangelize fails under slight scrutiny. But Calvinists tend not to see all types of evangelistic meth-

⁶J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, second edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 99.

⁷*Ibid.*, 106.

⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

⁹*Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 122.

ods as equal. To this end, Packer writes, “If we regarded it as our job, not simply to present Christ, but actually to produce converts—to evangelize, not only faithfully, but also successfully—our approach to evangelism would become pragmatic and calculating.”¹¹ Packer might as well directly implicate Charles Finney, the famed evangelist of the Second Great Awakening who promised that revival would surely follow if church leaders implemented his “new measures.”

Charles Spurgeon worried, as did Princeton theologian Charles Hodge, about one method popular during the Second Great Awakening and still popular today, especially among Southern Baptists—the altar call. They argued that this method can create an artificial crisis. Instead of thinking about the gospel, some become preoccupied by the decision to walk forward. Later they might be tempted to place faith in the event of the altar call rather than in the God who rescued them and promises to sustain them. After he finished preaching, Spurgeon’s congregants left the building in silence. Members stayed behind to speak with those who had questions.

To be sure, the sovereign God can use any means to reach his elect. I’m thankful he does. God saved me through a ministry that in retrospect did nearly everything wrong. Leaders set teenagers on edge by depriving them of adequate sleep. Student speakers shared less about the gospel than they did about their heart-wrenching experiences of losing friends and enduring sin’s consequences. Some leaders deceived new students so that later during the retreat weekend they could win over the students with surprises.

By some standards the ministry worked. Scores of teenagers emotionally professed faith in Christ, but few endured for even a short while once the retreat finished. Their old friends waited back home. Churches couldn’t match the retreat’s emotional highs. Yet this is how God decided to reveal himself to me.

Packer foresaw these squabbles over technique because he saw them in history. One group complains so much about methods that it becomes tempted not to evangelize at all. Another group can’t figure out why converts struggle with discipleship. Packer cautions, “Satan, of course, will do anything to hold up evangelism and divide Christians;

¹¹Ibid., 27.

so he tempts the first group to become inhibited and cynical about all current evangelistic endeavors, and the second group to lose its head and become panicky and alarmist, and both to grow self-righteous and bitter and conceited as they criticize each other.”¹²

Now is no time for Calvinism to make evangelicals self-righteous and bitter toward each other. Not with so great a harvest awaiting God’s people around the world. Theological debates can only do so much. Calvinists, for their part, can make the critics look silly by beating them at their own game.

“We’re going to see a lot more emphasis on church planting,” Tom Ascol said. “God is using the climate in the Convention and hostility against Calvinism to send a lot of our choice young men overseas. The International Mission Board is flooded with Calvinists. It’s great.”

¹²Ibid., 95.