

## “Southern Baptist Calvinism: Setting the Record Straight”

By Nathan A. Finn

### Introduction

Several years ago a college sophomore and interim youth minister read two books wherein the authors argued for a Calvinistic understanding of salvation.<sup>1</sup> Like perhaps many Southern Baptists, what little this collegian knew about Calvinism was mostly incorrect, based upon stereotypes rather than reality. In fact, he was so jaded toward Calvinism it is unlikely he would have purchased the books had he known the authors’ convictions. So it was unnerving for the young man when he found these books both compelling and winsome. He spent a few days studying Scripture and investigating Calvinism before finally concluding that he had become a Calvinist.<sup>2</sup> That young man cried the night he embraced the doctrines of grace, convinced he would never be able to serve in another Southern Baptist church. And I loved my denomination.

While almost a decade later I remain a convinced Calvinist and a Southern Baptist, there remain multitudes of Christians who are uncomfortable with the doctrines of grace, including some fellow Southern Baptists. While many believers have thoughtfully considered Calvinism and rejected it based upon their understanding of Scripture, multitudes have written off Calvinistic theology as a result of misunderstandings of Calvinism or misinformation about Calvinists. This is not to imply only non-Calvinists are guilty of misrepresentation; Southern Baptists on both sides of the Calvinism aisle sometimes spread misinformation. But because non-Calvinists are in the majority in the SBC, their stereotypes are more widespread than those made by Calvinists.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, because non-Calvinists often have larger platforms within the convention, their opinions—even when incorrect—tend to carry considerable weight. This leads to many Southern Baptists being at best hesitant regarding the doctrines of grace, at a time when Calvinism is becoming an increasingly popular view among younger Southern Baptists.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The two books were J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), and John Piper, *Future Grace* (Eugene, OR: Multnomah, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, the term “Calvinism” will be used for those who affirm all five of the classical points of Calvinism. “Non-Calvinist” will be used as a generic term for those who do not affirm all five points. This usage is consistent with the structure of the Building Bridges Conference, where an earlier version of this chapter was first presented. The five points of Calvinism are often referred to as the “doctrines of grace,” a term I use several times in this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Libby Lovelace, “Is TULIP Blooming In The SBC? LifeWay Research Publishes Findings On Calvinism,” available online at [http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article\\_main\\_page/0%2C1703%2CA%25253D163839%252526M%25253D200903%2C00.html](http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/article_main_page/0%2C1703%2CA%25253D163839%252526M%25253D200903%2C00.html)? (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> There are numerous possible reasons for Calvinism’s growth among younger Southern Baptists. For scholarly proposals, see C. Douglas Weaver and Nathan A. Finn, “Youth for Calvin? Reformed Theology and Baptist Collegians,” *Baptist History and Heritage* (Spring 2004): 40–55, and Anthony Chute, “When We Talk About Calvinism, Let’s Be Honest,” unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Evangelical

This chapter assesses some of the most common mischaracterizations of Southern Baptist Calvinists. My goal is to correct some myths about SBC Calvinists and provide a more accurate picture of what Calvinistic Southern Baptists actually believe. With this in mind, a few words about methodology are in order. Because this chapter pertains to Calvinism in the SBC, I only cite Southern Baptist Calvinists. Though SBC Calvinists are in substantial agreement with Calvinists in other traditions concerning the doctrines of grace, I want to allow Calvinists in the convention to speak for themselves.<sup>5</sup> In an effort to be fair to non-Calvinists, this chapter only addresses stereotypes that can be documented. My engaging in hearsay will do nothing to further the conversation and build bridges among Southern Baptists. Because this chapter is devoted to common caricatures, the bulk of my interaction is with popular media, including sermons, denominational periodicals, weblogs, and short books. As a final word, while there are numerous stereotypes of SBC Calvinism, for the sake of space this chapter focuses upon five myths that are pervasive and can be easily documented.<sup>6</sup>

### **Myths about Southern Baptist Calvinism**

Before discussing some of the most common myths about Southern Baptist Calvinism, it would be helpful to provide four key assumptions that guide this chapter. I assume that, as a general rule, Southern Baptist Calvinists and non-Calvinists agree on the basics of the gospel. All parties agree that Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God who was incarnate in the Virgin Mary, lived a life of perfect obedience to God's law, provided a penal substitutionary atonement for sinners on the cross, and was resurrected after three days in the tomb, securing the justification of every person who repents of their sins and trusts Christ as Lord and Savior. A second assumption trusts that most of the mischaracterizations of Southern Baptist Calvinism are based upon misunderstanding or confusion. While this assumption may offend some non-Calvinists, this is certainly not my intention. Simply put, to presuppose many critics of SBC Calvinism are misinformed or confused is better than the alternative, which would be to assume there are Southern Baptists who are deliberately misrepresenting others with whom they disagree. I sincerely hope such a sinful approach does not characterize the majority of those who make incorrect statements about Calvinism, or vice versa.

I assume that most interested Southern Baptists desire to understand Calvinism, even if they reject its conclusions. Undoubtedly many Southern Baptists remain uninterested in the topic, but those individuals who do care about this discussion want to know the facts. When we

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Theological Society (November 2007), 9–13. I have a copy of Chute's paper in my possession. For a recent popular discussion of Calvinism's surge among younger Southern Baptists and other evangelicals, see Collin Hansen, "Young, Restless, and Reformed," *Christianity Today* (September 2006), available online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/42.32.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> While numerous historic Baptist figures were Calvinists, I mostly only interact with contemporary Calvinistic Southern Baptists. This is in part because history is limited as an apologetic tool, in this matter and in most matters. As Anthony Chute notes, "Southern Baptists have always had a wide variety of concerns and have selected their heroes accordingly." See Chute, "When We Talk About Calvinism, Let's Be Honest," 8.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Timmy Brister, M.Div. student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and proprietor of the weblog "Provocations and Pantings" for providing me with a copy of his nearly exhaustive list of publicly available information about Southern Baptist Calvinism over the past quarter century. Brister's weblog can be accessed at <http://timmybrister.com> (accessed November 9, 2007).

have accurate information, we are better able to make informed decisions. Finally I assume that the best way to move the conversation forward in a manner beneficial to the entire convention is for all Southern Baptists to accurately represent the beliefs of those with whom they differ. As we do so, we may discover we share more in common than it sometimes appears. It is critical we understand each other if we are to cooperate as a convention to proclaim the gospel to America and the ends of the earth. The following myths are examined in this spirit of cooperation.

### **Myth One: Calvinism is a Threat to Evangelism**

We Southern Baptists pride ourselves on being an evangelistic denomination. The dual emphases of evangelism and missions have been at the heart of the SBC since its founding in 1845, when two of the convention's first acts were the formation of Foreign and Domestic Mission Boards.<sup>7</sup> Since Arthur Flake's pioneering work during the second quarter of the twentieth century, many Southern Baptist churches have made evangelism a central component of their Sunday School ministries.<sup>8</sup> Denominational agencies have published numerous curricula dedicated to equipping churches and individuals to effectively share their faith with non-Christians.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, denominational leaders like Bobby Welch, Thom Rainer, and Chuck Lawless have called upon Southern Baptists to rekindle our zeal for sharing the gospel with all people, in the hopes that we can reach more unbelievers and baptize multitudes of new converts.<sup>10</sup> As a rule, Southern Baptists eschew any theology or practice that seems to stifle zeal for the Great Commission.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, many Southern Baptists perceive Calvinism to be just such a theology.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, several Baptist state papers claimed that Calvinism is a threat to evangelism. This was largely in response to the 1993 election of R. Albert Mohler Jr. as president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. For example, in an article published in the *Texas Baptist Standard*, Robert Sloan is quoted as claiming that "[Calvinism] is a dagger to the heart of evangelism. The simple historical fact is that it is a deterrent to evangelism."<sup>12</sup> Frank

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<sup>7</sup> *Southern Baptist Convention Annual*, 1845, 14.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Arthur Flake, *Building a Standard Sunday School* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1934). For a recent argument for adopting Flake's basic approach, see Kenneth S. Hemphill, *Revitalizing the Sunday Morning Dinosaur: A Sunday School Growth Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Some recent examples include Continuous Witnessing Training (CWT), FAITH, and *Share Jesus Without Fear*, published by LifeWay Christian Resources, and The NET, produced by the North American Mission Board.

<sup>10</sup> See Norm Miller, "SBC President Bobby Welch to Launch Bus Tour in August," *Baptist Press* (June 16, 2004), available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=18492> (accessed November 16, 2007); Thom S. Rainer, "A Resurgence Not Yet Realized: Evangelistic Effectiveness in the Southern Baptist Convention Since 1979," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 54–69; Chuck Lawless, "Why I love Southern Baptists ... and Why I am Concerned," *Baptist Press* (October 23, 2007), available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/BPFfirstPerson.asp?ID=26680> (accessed November 16, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> As Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary president Danny Akin notes, "Any theology that does not result in a 'hot heart' for lost souls is a theology not worth having." See Daniel L. Akin, "Article V: God's Purpose of Grace," in *Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America's Largest Protestant Denomination*, eds. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 49.

Stagg authored an article for Mississippi's *The Baptist Record* wherein he claims that the type of Calvinism advocated in Southern Seminary's *Abstract of Principles* "makes missions and evangelism a mere formality, with 'salvation' and 'reprobation' settled before the creation." Furthermore, Stagg argues that Southern Seminary founder James P. Boyce's commitment to missions proves that Boyce held to a "modified" Calvinism, a "hybrid" of Calvinism and Arminianism.<sup>13</sup> A 1997 editorial in Kentucky's *Western Recorder* concedes that SBC Calvinists are missions-minded, but worries that future Southern Baptists will possess less missionary fervor because "[Calvinist] theology doesn't breed a natural zeal for missions."<sup>14</sup> This particular editorial, and the responses it generated, prompted *Christianity Today* to weigh in on the Calvinism debate in the SBC.<sup>15</sup>

Longtime Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary church historian William Estep penned a widely read article for the *Baptist Standard* that was arguably the most controversial anti-Calvinism article of the 1990s. Estep claims that historic Calvinism, when logically followed, is antithetical to missions, arguing "The Great Commission is meaningless if every person is programmed for salvation or damnation, for evangelism and missionary effort are exercises in futility." Estep warns Southern Baptists to avoid Calvinism because the issue will further divide an already divided denomination.<sup>16</sup> Estep's article provoked a flood of letters to the *Baptist Standard*, many of which were reprinted in subsequent issues of the periodical.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the Summer 1997 issue of *Founder's Journal* featured several responses to Estep, including articles by Albert Mohler, Tom Ascol, and Roger Nicole.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Wingfield, "Who Has a Chance to Get to Heaven: Resurgent Calvinism Spawns New Controversy," *Baptist Standard* (December 7, 1994): 16. Jesse Fletcher and Leon McBeth, who were also cited in the article, argue Southern Baptists are at their best when they balance the views of Calvinism and Arminianism. Nelson Price echoes Sloan's "dagger" quote in a 2006 article in Georgia's *Christian Index*. See Nelson Price, "Evangelical Calvinism is an Oxymoron," *Christian Index* (November 23, 2006), available online at <http://www.christianindex.org/2780.article> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Frank Stagg, "As the Twig is Bent ... Theological Institutions and the J. P. Boyce Legacy," *The Baptist Record* (January 5, 1995): 6. The *Abstract of Principles* is also the foundational confessional document of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

<sup>14</sup> See Mark Wingfield, "Will Kentucky Churches Buy Calvinism?" *Western Recorder* (September 9, 1997): 5.

<sup>15</sup> Keith Hinson, "Calvinism Resurging Among SBC's Young Elites," *Christianity Today* (October 6, 1997), available online at <http://ctlibrary.com/1316> (accessed November 14, 2007). For reactions to Wingfield's original editorial, see Art Toalston, "Editor's critique of Calvinism prompts challenges in return," *Baptist Press* (September 19, 1997), available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=4046> (accessed November 16, 2007), and Tom Ascol, "Doctrinal Integrity Restored at Southern Seminary" in *Western Recorder* (September 23, 1997): 6.

<sup>16</sup> William R. Estep, "Doctrines Lead to 'Dunghill,' Prof Warns," *Baptist Standard* (March 26, 1997): 12.

<sup>17</sup> See "Readers Respond to Story on Calvinism," *Baptist Standard* (April 9, 1997): 4, and "Estep and Calvinism: Against and For," *Baptist Standard*, (April 16, 1997): 4.

<sup>18</sup> The entire issue, including a reprint of Estep's original article, is available at <http://www.founders.org/FJ29/article1.html> (accessed November 12, 2007).

This myth continues to be promulgated into the twenty-first century. In a 2000 article in the *Baptist Standard*, evangelist Freddie Gage is quoted as claiming “There is not a nickel's worth of difference between liberalism, five-point Calvinism [*sic*] and dead orthodoxy. They are all enemies of soul-winning.”<sup>19</sup> That same year, current SBC President Frank Page wrote *The Trouble With the Tulip*, wherein he claims that “If one studies the pages of history, one will see that Calvinistic theology (Five Point) has encouraged a slackening of the aggressive evangelistic and missionary heartbeat of the church.”<sup>20</sup> In a 2006 editorial in Tennessee's *Baptist and Reflector*, Lonnie Wilkey accuses SBC Calvinists of not sharing Jesus' sense of urgency for the lost. He also fears they will cease witnessing, giving to the Cooperative Program, or praying for unbelievers. But in an effort to be “fair,” Wilkey admits that “some” convention Calvinists believe in sharing the gospel with non-Christians.<sup>21</sup> In an article on his ministry's website, Nelson Price argues that “Calvinism offers no incentive to go on mission trips, witness to the lost, visit for the church, or appeal for souls to be saved. Without such churches dwindle.”<sup>22</sup>

In April 2005, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary Provost Steve Lemke delivered a paper at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary titled “The Future of Southern Baptists as Evangelicals.” Lemke devotes several pages to addressing the potential threat Calvinism poses to Southern Baptist evangelism. The heart of Lemke's critique is a statistical analysis of the baptismal data of 233 churches that claim to be friendly to Founders Ministries. Because these “Founders friendly” churches averaged fewer baptisms and experienced a lower baptismal ration than the “average” Southern Baptist congregation, Lemke concludes that Calvinistic congregations are less evangelistic than other SBC churches.<sup>23</sup> Former SBC President Jerry Vines summarizes how many non-Calvinists feel about this issue in a sermon preached at the First Baptist Church of Woodstock in October 2006. Vines flatly contends that if a Calvinist is a soul winner, it is in spite of his theology.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Wingfield, “Gage: Baptist Churches Not Reaching ‘Pagan’ Culture,” *Baptist Standard* (April 24, 2000): 10.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Page, *The Trouble With the Tulip: A Closer Examination of the Five Points of Calvinism* (Canton, GA: Riverstone Publishing, 2000), 75.

<sup>21</sup> Lonnie Wilkey, “Calvinists Have No Sense of Urgency—Jesus Did,” *Baptist and Reflector* (September 27, 2006): 5.

<sup>22</sup> Nelson Price, “Calvinism,” available online at <http://www.nelsonprice.com/index.php/?p=210> (accessed November 15, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Steve Lemke, “The Future of Southern Baptists as Evangelicals,” 16–17. A manuscript of Lemke's address is available at <http://www.nobts.edu/Faculty/ItoR/LemkeSW/Personal/SBCfuture.pdf> (accessed November 13, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> There is no longer an audio version of the sermon available at First Baptist Woodstock's website. A DVD of the sermon can be purchased from Jerry Vines Ministries, available online at <http://www.jerryvines.com/Detail.bok?no=73> (accessed November 14, 2007). This particular sermon is especially important because Florida Baptist Convention executive director James Sullivan ordered a copy mailed to every Baptist pastor in the state. See Tom Ascol's blog post “Florida Baptist Pastors Sent Anti-Calvinist Propaganda,” available online at <http://www.founders.org/blog/2007/06/florida-pastors-sent-anti-calvinist.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

While there is little doubt Southern Baptist Calvinists are not as evangelistic as they should be—which makes them like most Southern Baptists—it is incorrect to claim that SBC Calvinists are not committed to evangelism. *Founders Journal* has published numerous articles advocating evangelism, and at times entire issues of the periodical have been devoted to Calvinism’s effect on evangelism and/or missions.<sup>25</sup> In the Summer 2001 issue of *Founders Journal*, Tom Ascol authored a lengthy article in response to the charge that Calvinism threatens evangelism. Ascol states unequivocally that “We should not tolerate any teaching which cuts the nerve of biblical evangelism. The doctrines of grace, rightly understood and applied, have never done that.”<sup>26</sup> In a 2003 article, Ascol argues that the work of theological reform and the task of global mission go hand in hand, and Calvinism actually encourages missionary activity.<sup>27</sup>

Southern Baptist Calvinists have argued for their commitment to evangelism in other venues besides *Founders Journal*. Calvinists in the SBC serve as pastors of large churches, work as full-time evangelists, teach evangelism and missions in Southern Baptist seminaries, and author books on evangelism. One of Albert Mohler’s first acts as president of Southern Seminary was to establish the Billy Graham School for Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth in 1994. Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC, has recently written a book on evangelism.<sup>28</sup> The late Ernest Reisinger, who played a key role in establishing Founders Ministries, sums up how many convention Calvinists feel about evangelism when he contends that “Calvinism may kill man-centered evangelism, but true, biblical Calvinism gives evangelism its only proper doctrinal foundation. Furthermore, it guarantees evangelism’s success. God saves sinners—that is Calvinism. He does not merely make salvation possible, but actually saves by plan and power.”<sup>29</sup> Southern Baptist Calvinists have consistently gone “on the record” to affirm their commitment to evangelism and missions.

Before proceeding, a word is in order about whether statistical studies like the one Steve Lemke conducted prove anything about evangelism in Calvinistic churches. First, let me say that I share Lemke’s concern that many Southern Baptist churches show little passion for evangelism. Churches on both sides of the Calvinism issue must be committed to aggressively sharing the gospel with non-Christians. Nevertheless, there remain at least two major problems with Lemke’s methodology. First, the study was limited to those churches that choose to publicly align with Founders Ministries, a group with which many SBC Calvinists are not affiliated.

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<sup>25</sup> *Founders Journal* 5 (Summer 1991), *Founders Journal* 37 (Summer 1999), available online at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ37/contents.html>; available online at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ05/contents.html>; *Founders Journal* 33 (Summer 1998), available online at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ33/contents.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Tom Ascol, “Calvinism, Evangelism, and Founders Ministries,” *Founders Journal* 45 (Summer 2001), available online at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ45/editorial.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Tom Ascol, “Reformation and Missions,” *Founders Journal* 52 (Spring 2003), available at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ52/editorial.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Ernest Reisinger, “What Should We Think of Evangelism and Calvinism?” *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995), available online at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ19/article5.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

Second, Lemke did not survey any churches to inquire about their actual evangelistic activities, but instead merely conjectures about evangelism practices based upon baptismal statistics. All Lemke's study proves is that Founders-affiliated churches *baptize* fewer people than the "average" SBC church (whatever that means). The baptismal statistics say relatively little about the evangelistic commitment of these Founders friendly churches and communicates nothing about Calvinistic churches not publicly connected to Founders.

### **Myth Two: Calvinists are Against Invitations**

A second myth, related to the above misconception, claims that Southern Baptist Calvinists are opposed to invitations. This myth is at least in part the result of semantics; different Baptists define the word *invitation* in different ways. By invitation, many non-Calvinists mean the common practice of calling for public responses at the end of a corporate worship service or evangelistic event.<sup>30</sup> Many SBC Calvinists prefer to call this practice an "altar call" to distinguish this particular form of invitation from other means of inviting non-Christians to faith in Christ.<sup>31</sup> But for many non-Calvinists, a rejection of this type of invitation is considered proof that Calvinists are not committed to urging unbelievers to repent of their sins and trust Christ. For example, in an editorial in the *Baptist Standard*, Presnall Wood argues that James P. Boyce was less evangelistic than his colleague John A. Broadus because the former did not extend an invitation at the end of his sermons.<sup>32</sup> In his aforementioned editorial, Lonnie Wilkey claims that he has "heard of churches that give no invitation because they believe there is no point because God has decided who will be saved."<sup>33</sup>

Some scholars express concern that some Calvinists reject altar calls. In 1999, while speaking at the Arkansas Baptist Convention's Pastor's Conference, then Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary President Paige Patterson raised this issue. He notes that "Any person who holds to five-point Calvinism will never be in any danger in this convention as long as he does not allow it to lead him to unscriptural conclusions – such as we ought not to give invitations and things like that. When he gets to that point, either implicitly or explicitly, it has now become a hindrance to evangelism and missions."<sup>34</sup> Steve Lemke chastises Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary for even raising the question about the appropriateness of public invitations in one of its official publications.<sup>35</sup> In a post on his personal weblog, Liberty

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<sup>30</sup> For this use of *invitation* and an argument for the practice, see Charles S. Kelley Jr., *How Did They Do It? The Story of Southern Baptist Evangelism* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1993), 62–69.

<sup>31</sup> For example, see Allen Harrison, "I Thank God for the Call to Preach," *Founders Journal* (Winter 2003), available online at <http://www.founders.org/FJ51/article1.html> (accessed November 21, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Presnall Wood, "Nothing Wrong with 'Whosoever Will,'" *Baptist Standard* (August 16, 1995): 6.

<sup>33</sup> Wilkey, "Calvinists Have No Sense of Urgency – Jesus Did," 5.

<sup>34</sup> Tammi Reed Ledbetter, "Patterson, Pressler Caution Baptists against Detractions from Evangelism," *Baptist Press* (November 15, 1999), available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=2699> (accessed November 19, 2007). In response to a question from the audience about whether Calvinism was compatible with the *Baptist Faith and Message*, Patterson noted "There's plenty of room under the umbrella for anyone who is anything from a one- to five-point Calvinist ..."

Theological Seminary President Ergun Caner claims that there is room in the SBC for “four-point” Calvinists, “as long as [Calvinism] does not interfere with the biblical imperative of personal soul winning and *corporate invitations*.”<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps it would be helpful to discuss why some Southern Baptist Calvinists are uncomfortable with some forms of public invitations. Some Calvinists fear it is too easy for individuals and churches to confuse responding to an altar call with actual conversion. Historian Bill Leonard argues that the invitation system has transformed the physical manifestation of the conversion experience—typically embodied in walking a church aisle—into a semi-sacramental practice in many SBC churches.<sup>37</sup> It is this very concern that public invitations often devolve into a “practical sacramentalism” that leads Jim Eliff, director of Christian Communicator’s Worldwide, to encourage churches to seriously reconsider the practice.<sup>38</sup>

Tom Nettles contends that the emphasis on public invitations is a result of pragmatism, rooted in the so-called “new measures” of the Second Great Awakening. He argues that the practice represents a departure from the earlier understanding that the entire sermon was intended to press the claims of Christ on lost sinners.<sup>39</sup> He further claims that the invitation system, along with other pragmatically driven approaches to evangelism, is largely responsible for the great disparity between SBC baptismal numbers and actual church membership and attendance.<sup>40</sup> Paul Alexander, writing for IX Marks Ministries, gives nine reasons that many Calvinists are uncomfortable with “altar call evangelism.” Many of his reasons are concerned with avoiding the appearance that the invitation is a saving event or judging the merits of a worship service based upon the number of people who come forward at its conclusion.<sup>41</sup>

It should be noted not all Southern Baptist Calvinists are opposed to extending public invitations when they preach.<sup>42</sup> There is no uniform Calvinist opinion on the altar call. It should also be noted that there are non-Calvinists in the SBC who do not extend public invitations in

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<sup>35</sup> Lemke, “The Future of Southern Baptists as Evangelicals,” 15.

<sup>36</sup> Ergun Caner, “Before You Send Your Letters of Outrage . . .,” available online at <http://www.erguncaner.com/site/?p=145> (accessed November 14, 2007). The emphasis in the quote is mine.

<sup>37</sup> Bill J. Leonard, “Southern Baptists and Conversion: An Evangelical Sacramentalism,” in *Ties that Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*, eds. Gary A. Furr and Curtis W. Freeman (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1994), 9–22, especially 16–17.

<sup>38</sup> Jim Eliff, “Closing with Christ,” available online at <http://www.ccwonline.org/closing.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> Tom Nettles, *Ready for Reformation? Bringing Authentic Reform to Southern Baptist Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 53–60.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–63.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Alexander, “Altar Call Evangelism,” available at <http://www.9marks.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526|CHID598016|CIID1804792.00.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Mark Coppenger, “Kairos and the ‘Altar Call,’” *Heartland* (Summer 1999): 8–9.



worship services.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, while some Southern Baptist Calvinists express reservations about corporate invitations, this should not be equated with a denial that pastors should preach in such a way as to encourage sinners to repent of their sins and trust Christ. Indeed, SBC Calvinists defend evangelistic preaching.<sup>44</sup> What many Calvinists are hesitant about is a particular *method* that is popular among many Southern Baptists, and rejection of the method should not be confused with a rejection of direct, passionate evangelistic preaching. Disagreement over methods should not be a point of division in the Southern Baptist Convention.<sup>45</sup> What matters is that all of us, Calvinist and non-Calvinist alike, plead with sinners to repent of their sins and trust Christ as Lord and Savior, regardless of our respective convictions on altar calls.

### **Myth Three: Five-Point Calvinism is Hyper-Calvinism**

A third myth, often coupled with the above, claims that Calvinism is more or less equivalent to hyper-Calvinism. The latter is an aberrant version of Calvinism embracing a number of doctrines that stifle evangelism. According to Timothy George, hyper-Calvinists depart from Calvinism in five areas. Hyper-Calvinists affirm eternal justification, which downplays the need for individual conversion. They deny the free moral agency and responsibility for unbelievers to repent and believe, which turns divine providence into fatalism. They restrict the gospel invitation to the elect, which denies the free offer of the gospel to all people. Hyper-Calvinists teach that non-Christians must be convinced they are among the elect before they have a “warrant” to believe, which undermines salvation by grace through faith. Most importantly, hyper-Calvinists deny the universal love of God to all people, arguing God only loves the elect and hates the non-elect.<sup>46</sup> Most English Calvinistic Baptists rejected these convictions in the late 1700s, largely because of the leadership of Calvinists like Andrew Fuller, William Carey, and Robert Hall Sr.<sup>47</sup> While many Primitive Baptists embraced hyper-Calvinism in the mid-nineteenth century, the majority

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<sup>43</sup> For example, see Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growing without Compromising Your Method & Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 302–06.

<sup>44</sup> For example, see Mark Dever, “Evangelistic Expository Preaching,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, eds. Philip Graham Ryken et al (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 122–39, and Mark Coppenger, “The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching,” *Founders Journal* 25 (Summer 1996), available online at <http://www.founders.org/FJ25/article1.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> This is a point that non-Calvinist Danny Akin makes in a recent article. See Daniel L. Akin, “Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: How Should Southern Baptists Respond to the Issue of Calvinism,” *SBC LIFE* (April 2005), available online at <http://www.sbclife.com/Articles/2006/04/sla7.asp> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Timothy George, *Amazing Grace: God’s Initiative—Our Response* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2000), 90–91. See also Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986; reprint, Lake Charles, LA: Cor Meum Tibi, 2002), 385–91.

<sup>47</sup> See Peter J. Morden, *Offering Christ to the World: Andrew Fuller (1754–1815) and the Revival of Eighteenth-Century Particular Baptist Life*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK, and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003); Timothy George, *Faithful Witness: The Life and Mission of William Carey* (Birmingham: New Hope, 1991); Nathan A. Finn, “Robert Hall’s Contributions to Evangelical Renewal in the Northamptonshire Baptist Association,” *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 6.1 (Fall 2007): 19–34.

of Baptists in the South—including the Calvinists who formed the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845—rejected the system.<sup>48</sup>

Unfortunately, many Southern Baptist non-Calvinists misunderstand hyper-Calvinism. In March 2006, Southwestern Seminary professor Malcolm Yarnell preached a sermon in several venues titled “The Heart of a Baptist.” In the sermon, Yarnell warns that “Hyper-Calvinism is becoming a real problem in the Southern Baptist Convention.” He then ties hyper-Calvinism with “a refusal to given an invitation,” an issue addressed above. To his credit, despite his reductionistic understanding of hyper-Calvinism, Yarnell acknowledges that “five-point Calvinism is not necessarily hyper-Calvinism.”<sup>49</sup> In an article in the *Alabama Baptist*, retired Southwestern Seminary theologian James Leo Garrett addresses traditional hyper-Calvinist doctrines like eternal justification and a refusal to preach the gospel indiscriminately. Unfortunately, Garrett also claims that belief in unconditional election and the so-called “covenant of redemption” between the Father and Christ are also hyper-Calvinist doctrines.<sup>50</sup> They are not.

Some non-Calvinists more directly equate hyper-Calvinism with Calvinism. In his Mid-America Seminary address, Steve Lemke claims that Founders Ministries embraces “hard hyper-Calvinism” and argues that the traditional five points of Calvinism, codified by the Synod of Dordt, represent hyper-Calvinism.<sup>51</sup> In a sermon preached at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, Jack Graham argues that the doctrines of grace result in a “hyper theology of Calvinism” that is the “death sentence” for missions and evangelism.<sup>52</sup> Ergun Caner has also confused Calvinism with hyper-Calvinism, both in print and in the pulpit.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See Anthony L. Chute, *A Piety Above the Common Standard: Jesse Mercer and the Defense of Evangelistic Calvinism* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2004), 61–160, and Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 161–86; Timothy George, “Southern Baptist Theology: Whence and Whither?” *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995), available online at <http://www.founders.org/FJ19/article2.html> (accessed November 14, 2007); Tom J. Nettles, “The Rise and Decline of Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention,” *Founders Journal* 19/20 (Winter/Spring 1995), available online at <http://www.founders.org/FJ19/article1.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “The Heart of a Baptist,” 9. The address was published as a White Paper by Southwestern’s Center for Theological Research and is available at <http://baptisttheology.org> (accessed November 13, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> James Leo Garrett, “Calvinism: What Does it Mean?” *The Alabama Baptist* (August 2, 2007), available online at <http://www.al.com/living/alabamabaptist/index.ssf?/base/living/118581126297920.xml&coll=8> (accessed November 14, 2007). The so-called “covenant of redemption” is a tenet of traditional Reformed theology and is affirmed by many Calvinistic Baptists. The doctrine is also explicitly affirmed in a number of Baptist Confessions, including the Second London Confession (1677/1689) and the Philadelphia Confession (1742).

<sup>51</sup> Lemke, “The Future of Southern Baptists as Evangelicals,” 13. Lemke slightly backed away from his use of the term “hyper-Calvinism” in a letter posted on Tom Ascol’s blog. Lemke writes, “I also have come to believe that the term ‘hyperCalvinism’ [*sic*] is just too controversial and understood to mean too many different things to different people to be very useful in the discussion.” See Tom Ascol, “Steve Lemke’s Letter and My Response,” available at <http://www.founders.org/blog/2005/08/steve-lemkes-letter-and-my-response.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

Contemporary Southern Baptist Calvinists uniformly reject hyper-Calvinism as a perversion of the doctrines of grace and are regularly frustrated that so many non-Calvinists conflate the two movements. Tom Nettles speaks for many convention Calvinists in a 1997 article titled “Are Calvinists Hyper?”

There is little appreciation of the distinction between Calvinism and hyper-Calvinism in spite of some recent writings, including Timothy George's biography of William Carey *A Faithful Witness*, which have carefully delineated the differences. Many continue to fail, even in the most appropriate historical context, to give a clear picture of the aggressive evangelical Calvinism that characterized the leaders of the mission movement among English Baptists, American Baptists, and Southern Baptists. Their missionary involvement becomes abstracted from a theological framework and seems to be purely the outcome of guts and zeal or of love for Christ unconnected to any clear views of doctrinal truth. That hyper-Calvinism really is a different theological system from Calvinism is rarely discussed. Hyper-Calvinism is seen as *very serious Calvinism* or “Five-point Calvinism” or the defense of “limited atonement” or “supralapsarianism.”<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps Timothy George is correct when he claims that the “ghost” of nineteenth-century hyper-Calvinism still haunts the SBC, leading non-Calvinists to fear that Calvinistic Southern Baptists are always just a few steps away from hyper-Calvinism.<sup>55</sup> Be that as it may, non-Calvinists are wrong when they claim historic, traditional Calvinism is hyper-Calvinism.

#### **Myth Four: Calvinists Deny Free Will**

A fourth myth asserts that Calvinists deny human free will. William Estep summarizes how many non-Calvinists feel about the Calvinistic understanding of human freedom, arguing that “Calvinism robs the individual of responsibility for his/her own conduct, making a person into a puppet on a string or a robot programmed from birth to death with no will of his/her own.”<sup>56</sup> This particular accusation is tricky, because there are a number of ways to define “free will,” and there is no single Calvinist view (or non-Calvinist view, for that matter). A full treatment of this

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<sup>52</sup> Jack Graham, “The Truth about Grace,” audio available online at <http://resources.christianity.com/details/psc/19000101/9290F735-33AF-45FC-83A3-2386D0699096.aspx> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>53</sup> See Ergun Caner, “Predestined NOT to be a Hyper-Calvinist,” *National Liberty Journal* (June/July 2005). Caner also preached a sermon by the same title at Thomas Road Baptist Church on April 9, 2006. A DVD of Caner’s sermon can be purchased from his website, <http://www.erguncaner.com> (accessed November 14, 2007). See also idem, “Questions on Neo-Calvinism, Part 1,” available at <http://www.erguncaner.com/site/?p=138> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> Tom J. Nettles, “Are Calvinists Hyper?” *Founders Journal* 30 (Fall 1997), available online at <http://www.founders.org/FJ30/article1.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>55</sup> Timothy George, “Southern Baptist Ghosts,” *First Things* 93 (May 1999): 17–24, available online at <http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9905/articles/george.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> Estep, “Doctrines Lead to ‘Dunghill,’ Prof Warns,” 12. See also Page, *The Trouble With the Tulip*, 43.

topic is beyond the scope of this chapter, though there are a number of fine Calvinistic works addressing the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.<sup>57</sup>

This chapter will focus on one aspect of the free will issue: the accusation that God's saving intention is divorced from human responsibility. This myth comes in two forms, the first claims that God saves people who do not, of their own free will, desire to be saved. The second, and seemingly more common version, argues that God refuses to save individuals who sincerely believe in Christ because they are not numbered among the elect. Non-Calvinists in the SBC have often charged convention Calvinists with the latter.

This stereotype is often tied to a misunderstanding of the Calvinist doctrine of irresistible grace. In a widely disseminated sermon titled "The C-Word," longtime Southwestern Seminary evangelism professor Roy Fish argues that irresistible grace destroys free will:

The "I" in the TULIP is what is called irresistible grace. That means that people who are going to be saved have no other option. They really don't have a choice. The grace of God cannot be resisted. They cannot resist this special saving grace.<sup>58</sup>

In a 2006 article in Georgia's *Christian Index*, Nelson Price claims that Calvinists believe God saves and damns people irrespective of their free will in the following illustration:

A mass of people are gathered at a bus stop marked "Planet Earth." Along comes the Celestial Bus marked "Destination Heaven." It pulls up and stops. The driver, who is God, opens the door, and says, "All destined for heaven get on board." A number do. A missionary couple who with zeal have served Christ all their lives start on and God says, "Step aside. You haven't been chosen to ride this bus." A couple of infants start on and God tells them to step aside. Persons who from youth have loved and ministered in Christ's name are told to step aside. As the bus is about to depart and the door is closing God says to those not on board, "Catch the next bus." "No," they plead, "here comes the next bus and it is driven by Satan and marked 'Destination Hell.'"

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<sup>57</sup> For example, see D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R, 1932), 208–27; Bruce A. Ware, "Effectual Calling and Grace," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives of Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 203–26.

<sup>58</sup> Roy Fish, "The C-Word," a sermon preached at Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama, August 11, 1997. A manuscript of the sermon is available online at <http://www.sbccalvinist.com/cword.htm> (accessed November 15, 2007). The manuscript has circulated in at least one state convention. This misunderstanding has also been promulgated in recent days by megachurch pastors Steve Gaines and Jack Graham. See Steve Gaines, "I Believe in Salvation," preached October 16, 2006. The audio of the sermon is no longer available at Bellevue Baptist Church's website, but Gaines's sermon outline is available at <http://www.bellevue.org/clientimages/1360/sermons/notes10-16-05.pdf> (accessed November 15, 2007). See also Jack Graham, "The Truth about Grace," wherein Graham argues irresistible grace means an individual has no choice in her salvation and that God's grace "attacks" a person and "forces" or "coerces" her to believe.

Sorry,” says God. “I didn’t choose to save you. Your love and commitment to Jesus doesn’t matter.”<sup>59</sup>

Price seems convinced that the Calvinist view of salvation entails God arbitrarily damning genuine Christians because they are not numbered among the elect. He also claims that Calvinists believe some infants go to hell, a position a number of Southern Baptist Calvinists have publicly repudiated.<sup>60</sup> In Price’s illustration, God’s sovereignty and human free will are portrayed as totally incompatible concepts that operate independently of each other.

These examples evidence a misunderstanding of what SBC Calvinists believe about the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. God neither saves those who do not desire to be saved nor does he damn those who are saved. Ernest Reisinger argues that “No man is saved against his will. No man is pardoned while he hates the thought of forgiveness. No man shall have joy in the Lord if he says, ‘I do not wish to rejoice in the Lord....’ We are not saved against our will; nor is the will taken away, but the work of the Spirit of God is to change the human will, and so make men willing ...”<sup>61</sup> Following earlier Baptist theologians like Andrew Fuller, Tom Nettles makes a distinction between moral and natural ability, arguing that individuals are *naturally* capable of repentance and faith, but because of their captivity to sin they are *morally* unable to choose Christ. Irresistible grace, or better, effectual calling, is thus God’s regeneration of the sinner, making his will compatible with God’s saving intention.<sup>62</sup>

In his essay “The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching,” Mark Coppenger argues that the SBC has increasingly been characterized by a view of human free will that inadequately accounts for bondage to sin. In this setting, effectual calling is viewed as doing violence to one’s will rather than genuinely freeing the will to pursue God. Coppenger notes, “While few deny the reality of human free agency (else what sense could we make of the conscious rejection or acceptance of the gospel?), it seems that, today, the ‘freedom’ of the lost has been magnified at the expense of their ‘bondage.’ Unlike the founders of the Southern

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<sup>59</sup> Price, “Evangelical Calvinism is an Oxymoron.”

<sup>60</sup> While some Calvinists do believe not all infants are elect, those SBC Calvinists who have engaged this issue have uniformly argued all infants are numbered among the elect. For example, see R. Albert Mohler Jr. and Daniel L. Akin, “The Salvation of the ‘Little Ones’: Do Infants who Die Go to Heaven?” Available online at <http://albertmohler.com/FidelitasRead.php?article=fidel036> (accessed November 14, 2007). See also Ronald H. Nash, *When a Baby Dies: Answers to Comfort Grieving Parents* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

<sup>61</sup> Ernest Reisinger, “God’s Will, Man’s Will, and Free Will,” *Founders Journal* 25 (Summer 1996), available online at <http://www.founders.org/FJ25/article2.html> (accessed November 15, 2007). See also Andy Davis, “Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility,” preached November 11, 2006 at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. An audio recording of the sermon is available at <http://www.sbts.edu/MP3/fall2006/20061107davis.mp3> (accessed November 15, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, 295. For a recent discussion of Fuller’s view of moral versus natural ability, see Gerald L. Priest, “Andrew Fuller, Hyper-Calvinism, and the ‘Modern Question,’” in “*At the Pure Fountain of Thy Word*”: *Andrew Fuller as an Apologist*, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK, and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2004), 43–72.

Baptist Convention, some have come to view lost people as discriminating shoppers, whose failure to buy is due to our failure at marketing.”<sup>63</sup>

These men are simply echoing what SBC Calvinists have historically believed concerning the role of the human will in salvation: effectual calling renders God’s sovereignty and human free will compatible. This compatibility is perhaps best stated in the section on “Providence” in the *Abstract of Principles*: “God from eternity, decrees or permits all things that come to pass, and perpetually upholds, directs and governs all creatures and all events; yet so as not to destroy the free will and responsibility of intelligent creatures.”<sup>64</sup> Southern Baptist Calvinists echo Charles Spurgeon, who when asked how he reconciled divine sovereignty and human freedom, allegedly responded “I do not try to reconcile friends.”<sup>65</sup> SBC Calvinists uniformly believe that individuals must choose to trust Christ; we simply differ with non-Calvinists over the role God’s sovereignty plays in that choice.

### **Myth Five: Authentic Baptists are Not Calvinists**

The final myth this chapter addresses contends authentic Baptists are not Calvinists. From time to time, non-Calvinists argue that Calvinism is a foreign element that was introduced into either the Baptist tradition in general or, more specifically, the Southern Baptist Convention. For example, William Estep argues that the earliest Baptists were birthed from the English Separatist tradition, which was Calvinistic, but even Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists embraced a “modified” Calvinism that presumably softened traditional Calvinism. Estep bluntly states that “Baptists never have been doctrinaire Calvinists ...”<sup>66</sup> In their book *God So Loved the World*, Fisher Humphries and Paul Robertson argue that “traditional Baptists” are not Calvinists, claiming that their book is intended to help traditional Baptists understand Calvinism so they can “relate to [Calvinism] in a Christian way.”<sup>67</sup>

Some non-Calvinist scholars argue that Calvinism is a Presbyterian belief, implying that authentic Baptists do not embrace the doctrines of grace. In an article written for *SBC LIFE*, Malcolm Yarnell claims that “It could be successfully argued that the Calvinist-Arminian debate is, at root, a Presbyterian argument, not a Baptist one.” But despite this claim, Yarnell concedes that Baptists have, in fact, historically debated Calvinism and Arminianism. He admits, “Yet early English Baptists were also divided over the debate, with General Baptists identifying more with Arminians and Particular Baptists with Calvinists.”<sup>68</sup> In a discussion on Tom Ascol’s

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<sup>63</sup> Coppenger, “The Ascent of Lost Man in Southern Baptist Preaching.”

<sup>64</sup> *The Abstract of Principles*, available online at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/abstract.html> (accessed November 15, 2007).

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Lewis A. Drummond, “Charles Haddon Spurgeon,” in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, 122.

<sup>66</sup> Estep, “Doctrines Lead to ‘Dunghill,’ Prof Warns,” 12.

<sup>67</sup> Fisher Humphreys and Paul E. Robertson, *God So Loved the World: Traditional Baptists and Calvinism* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 2000), 5.

weblog, Ergun Caner claims that Calvinistic Baptists embrace what he calls “semi-Presbyterianism.” Caner also accuses SBC Calvinists of “killing” churches by preaching sermon series on the Presbyterian *Westminster Confession of Faith*, though he provides no examples of a Southern Baptist preaching from that confession.<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps one reason some scholars are so quick to disassociate Calvinism and the Baptist tradition is because of a desire to identify Baptists with some of the Anabaptist movements, the latter of which have historically been closer to Arminian theology than Calvinism. Yarnell emphasizes theological affinity between Baptists and Anabaptists. In commenting on a new Center for Free Church and Anabaptist Studies at Southwestern Seminary, he contends that Anabaptists are “those often persecuted groups who are identifiably Baptist from a biblical perspective.”<sup>70</sup> According to an article in *Baptist Press*, Caner goes a step further and identifies himself as “a radical reformer in the Anabaptist heritage.”<sup>71</sup> The late Estep was a prolific scholar of Anabaptism and perhaps the leading twentieth-century advocate of actual historical continuity between Baptists and Anabaptists.<sup>72</sup>

Southern Baptist Calvinists deny that Calvinism is foreign to the Baptist tradition. Rather, SBC Calvinists (and many non-Calvinist scholars) argue there have always been Calvinistic Baptists and that Calvinism has at times enjoyed considerable influence within the convention. William Brackney notes that the majority of early Baptists in America adhered to Calvinistic theology.<sup>73</sup> Historians like Tom Nettles and Timothy George have shown that, at the very least, a majority of the *leading* Baptists in the South during the nineteenth-century were Calvinists.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “The TULIP of Calvinism in Light of History and the Baptist Faith and Message,” SBC LIFE (April 2006), available online at <http://www.sbclife.com/Articles/2006/04/sla8.asp> (accessed November 15, 2007). Yarnell also believes some Southern Baptists, presumably Calvinists, “have apparently begun breaking down the biblical walls between Baptists and Presbyterians,” though he provides no explanation or examples. See Malcolm Yarnell III, “The Baptist Renaissance at Southwestern,” *Southwestern News* 65, no. 2. (Winter 2007), available online at <http://www.swbts.edu/swnews/features/feature8.cfm> (accessed November 15, 2007).

<sup>69</sup> See Tom Ascol, “Johnny Hunt to Be Nominated for President of the SBC,” available online at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/blog/2006/02/johnny-hunt-to-be-nominated-for.html> (accessed November 19, 2007).

<sup>70</sup> Yarnell, “The Baptist Renaissance at Southwestern.”

<sup>71</sup> Ledbetter, “Baptists and Calvinism: Event Was Called Off, But Not the Debate,” *Baptist Press* (October 18, 2006), available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=24192> (November 16, 2007). In published correspondence with Reformed Baptist theologian James White, Ergun Caner claims that the Founders Ministries website, and more specifically Tom Ascol’s weblog, is a site “where the semi-Presbyterians want to revise our Anabaptist, free church [*sic*] and dissenter heritage.” The correspondence between White and Caner is related to a defunct attempt to hold a public debate on the topic of Southern Baptists and Calvinism at Liberty University. The correspondence can be read online at <http://www.aomin.org/ErgunCaner1.html> (accessed November 15, 2007).

<sup>72</sup> For example, see William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 271–303.

<sup>73</sup> William H. Brackney, *Baptists in North America*, Religion in America (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 28.

<sup>74</sup> See Nettles, “The Rise and Demise of Calvinism among Southern Baptists”; idem, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 161–205; George, “Southern Baptist Theology: Whence and Wither?”

Leon McBeth observes that many Southern Baptist Calvinists identify with the *Second London Confession*, a document originally drafted in seventeenth-century England.<sup>75</sup> Whether or not Calvinism is biblical is a point worthy of debate, but the influence of Calvinism among Baptists in general and Southern Baptists in particular is a matter of historical record and simply cannot be disputed.

Furthermore, far from being “semi-Presbyterians,” Southern Baptist Calvinists have been vocal defenders of Baptist distinctives. Tom Ascol has publicly stated Founders Ministries and *Founders Journal* are committed to “historic Southern Baptist principles,” by which he means Calvinist soteriology and Baptist ecclesiology.<sup>76</sup> Timothy George co-edited the Library of Baptist Classics series for B&H Publishing, which includes a number of volumes dedicated to Baptist convictions.<sup>77</sup> Roughly half of the contributors to the recent book *Why I Am A Baptist* are Calvinists, and Tom Nettles co-edited the volume.<sup>78</sup> Nettles has also authored two different works defending believer’s baptism by immersion.<sup>79</sup> Fred Malone has also authored two helpful works defending the Baptist understanding of baptism.<sup>80</sup> Thomas Schreiner and Shawn Wright co-edited a collection of essays arguing for the Baptist understanding of baptism, with a number of Calvinists contributing to the volume.<sup>81</sup> In a recent article in Southern Seminary’s alumni magazine, Greg Wills contests the practice of Baptist churches accepting so-called “alien immersions” and argues that baptism is a prerequisite to the Lord’s Supper.<sup>82</sup> Mark Dever and

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<sup>75</sup> H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 699.

<sup>76</sup> For example, see Tom Ascol, “Historic Southern Baptist Principles,” *Founders Journal* 9 (Summer 1992), available online at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ09/editorial.html> (accessed November 15, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> For example, see E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997); Herschel H. Hobbs, *Baptist Why and Why Not Revisited* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997); B. H. Carroll, *Baptists and Their Doctrines* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999); J. M. Frost, *Baptist Why and Why Not* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998); John Albert Broadus, *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996); James P. Boyce, *Treasures from the Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996).

<sup>78</sup> Tom J. Nettles and Russell D. Moore, *Why I Am A Baptist* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001).

<sup>79</sup> See Tom J. Nettles, *Believer’s Baptism by Immersion*, Foundations of Baptist Heritage (Nashville: The Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1989), and idem, “Baptism of the Professing Regenerate by Immersion,” in *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

<sup>80</sup> See Fred A. Malone, *A String of Pearls Unstrung: A Theological Journey into Believer’s Baptism* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 1998), available online at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/library/malone1/string.html> (accessed November 30, 2007), and idem, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism versus Paedobaptism* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2003).

<sup>81</sup> See Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds, *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville: B&H, 2006).

<sup>82</sup> Greg Wills, “Are We All Wet or Does Baptism Matter?” *The Tie: Southern Seminary* 75, no. 3 (Fall 2007), 10–12. I have also argued that baptism is prerequisite to communion. See Nathan A. Finn, “Baptism as a



Phil Newton have each authored works defending congregational church government as essential to Baptist ecclesiology.<sup>83</sup> Simply put, Southern Baptist Calvinists are both committed Calvinists and authentic Baptists, sharing these convictions with many of our Baptist forbearers.

### **Conclusion: Toward a More Cooperative Future**

This chapter has argued that many non-Calvinists in the Southern Baptist Convention have misunderstood some of the convictions of their fellow Southern Baptists who embrace Calvinism. Hopefully, I have helped correct some of the most common misunderstandings about Southern Baptist Calvinists. But the question still remains, is it possible to build bridges between Calvinists and non-Calvinists in the SBC? In closing, I want to propose four commitments that Southern Baptists on both sides of the Calvinism debate must make if we are to better work together in preaching Christ to all people.

First, Southern Baptist Calvinists and non-Calvinists must share a common commitment to the gospel. One way to build on the gains made during the Conservative Resurgence is for all Southern Baptists to work together to pursue a “gospel resurgence” that will both revive our churches and re-ignite our passion for proclaiming the good news to all people. We must heed the words of Timothy George, who warns non-Calvinists to avoid falling into the heresy of Pelagianism and cautions Calvinists against tilting toward the heresy of hyper-Calvinism.<sup>84</sup> The former downplays the power of sin and exalts human freedom, often in a sincere effort to win more people to Christ. The latter quenches a passion for souls and degrades both God’s character and human responsibility, often in a sincere effort to be doctrinally pure. If we are to move toward a more cooperative future, we must commit ourselves to being gospel-centered, lest we drift toward these and other soul-destroying errors.

Second, both Calvinists and non-Calvinists must share a common commitment to historic Baptist distinctives. The Baptist view of the church is not intrinsic to the gospel, but Baptists believe it is more consistent with the gospel than pedobaptism, open membership, or hierarchical church government. We cannot divorce the gospel from its fruit: baptized Christians whose lives are characterized by a radical commitment to Christian discipleship, a responsible, disciplined church membership, and a zeal for the lost.<sup>85</sup> If we are to move toward a more cooperative future, Southern Baptists on both sides of the Calvinism discussion must commit to traditional Baptist principles, lest we drift toward errors like pedobaptism, theonomy, or polity structures that are antithetical to congregationalism.

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Prerequisite to the Lord’s Supper,” published by the Center for Theological Research (September 2006), available online at <http://www.baptisttheology.org/papers.cfm> (accessed November 15, 2007).

<sup>83</sup> See Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), and Phil Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005).

<sup>84</sup> David S. Dockery and Timothy George, *Building Bridges* (Nashville: Convention Press, 2007), 49–50.

<sup>85</sup> I am encouraged by recent efforts like “The Fifth Century Initiative,” a call from Texas pastor Bart Barber for Southern Baptists to recommit themselves to a gospel-centered Baptist ecclesiology as we get closer to the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Baptist movement in 2009. The text of “The Fifth Century Initiative” is available online at <http://praisegodbarebones.blogspot.com/2007/08/fifth-century-initiative.html> (accessed November 15, 2007).

Third, Southern Baptist Calvinists and non-Calvinists must share a common commitment to labor together in the task of the Great Commission. The original constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention claims that Baptists in the South formed a convention for the purpose of “eliciting, combining and directing the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort, for the propagation of the Gospel ...”<sup>86</sup> Simply put, the primary reason we cooperate as a convention is because Southern Baptists believe we can proclaim the good news to more people if we work together. This commitment to interchurch cooperation for missionary endeavors is at the heart of the SBC. If we are to thrive as *Southern Baptist* Calvinists and non-Calvinists, we must agree to work together in spite of our differences over the doctrines of grace or particular methods. If we are to move toward a more cooperative future, Southern Baptists must never allow our cooperation to be torn asunder by our own internal disputes over Calvinism or any other theological issue over which orthodox, gospel-centered, convictional Southern Baptists might disagree.

Finally, Southern Baptist Calvinists and non-Calvinists must share a common commitment to be humble, irenic, and loving when we attempt to persuade others to embrace our respective positions vis-à-vis the doctrines of grace. This means there are two scenarios we must avoid in our convention. The first is a combative atmosphere between Calvinists and non-Calvinists. God will not use the convention for his purposes if Calvinist Southern Baptists view non-Calvinist Southern Baptists as their enemies, and vice versa. Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists must repent of any mischaracterization, stereotyping, caricature, and slander that have been perpetrated in our debates over Calvinism. We must commit to engage others with whom we disagree in a winsome, Christ-like spirit, or we have no hope of a more cooperative future. In my opinion, Paige Patterson and Albert Mohler modeled this approach in their Calvinism dialog at the 2005 SBC Pastor’s Conference in Greensboro, North Carolina.<sup>87</sup>

The other scenario we must reject is a “naked public square” within the convention concerning Calvinism. A “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy is no foundation on which to build cooperation. Southern Baptists on both sides of the Calvinism discussion must be free to both hold their convictions and seek to persuade other Southern Baptists to embrace those convictions. To do anything less is to treat this issue as if it is unimportant—something neither side believes. Furthermore, it devalues our mutual commitment to pursue biblical truth and seek to teach our understanding of that truth to other Christians. The Calvinism issue is not going to go away, so Southern Baptists must be willing to openly discuss and debate the doctrines of grace in an effort to be biblically accurate and perhaps come to a greater theological consensus in the years to come. If we are to move toward a more cooperative future, we must all be committed to defending and commending our particular convictions, but not at the expense of either our cooperation with each other or our personal sanctification.

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<sup>86</sup> Cited from the original constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention. A copy of the document is available online at [http://baptiststudiesonline.com/?page\\_id=24](http://baptiststudiesonline.com/?page_id=24) (accessed November 16, 2007).

<sup>87</sup> See Michael Foust, “Patterson, Mohler: Calvinism Shouldn’t Divide SBC,” *Baptist Press* (June 13, 2006), available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=23457> (accessed November 16, 2007). Danny Akin, Tom Ascol, and Thom Rainer further demonstrated this type of spirit in hosting the conference at which this chapter was originally presented.