

Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility
How Should Southern Baptists Respond to the Issue of Calvinism?
by Daniel L. Akin, Ph.D.

Few issues are more likely to ignite a lively debate than a discussion of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Recent years have witnessed a renewed interest in this subject in Southern Baptist life, to the delight of some and chagrin of others. The Conservative Resurgence which began in 1979 was about the authority of the Bible. Those who believe the Bible to be the inerrant and infallible Word of God will take its doctrines seriously. Issues like predestination and election, freewill and human responsibility will naturally require our careful study.

Thankfully, our theological discussions are not those of other denominations in our day. Issues like the deity of Christ, the exclusivity of the Gospel, open theism, abortion, and homosexuality are settled for Southern Baptists because of our commitment to the clear teachings of Scripture.

However, some issues in the Bible are more obscure. There is often a mystery and tension to what we find when we examine all that the Bible says on some subjects. This is clearly the case when it comes to understanding God's sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation.

Unfortunately, there is more heat than light in many instances with shrill voices and unhealthy rhetoric — on both sides of the issue — getting too much attention. On one side you hear people saying that God hates the non-elect and damns babies to hell. They say that Jesus was a Calvinist and that Calvinism is the Gospel. On the other side you hear voices stating that Calvinism is heresy and that Calvinists do not believe in missions and evangelism. Some even suggest that the Southern Baptist Convention could split over this issue, though I am convinced this will not happen.

I believe we need to tone down the rhetoric. We need to seek biblical balance, theological sanity, and ministerial integrity in the midst of this discussion. Let me attempt to set the playing field for this important issue and then make some theological and practical suggestions as we work together for the glory of God and the cause of Christ.

A Look at Calvinism

The issue that is being debated today almost always revolves around the idea of Calvinism. To some, this is a theological landmine to be avoided at all cost, even if they are not sure what it means. For others it signals a recovery of biblical truth growing out of the Reformation of the 16th century and its emphasis on the great solas: Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, for the glory of God alone. John Calvin (1509-64) was the great theologian of the Reformation. An outstanding biblical scholar, he heralded the theology of both Paul and Augustine (354-430). Like Martin Luther (1483-1546), he emphasized the sovereignty of God, the sinfulness of man, and the necessity of grace for salvation.

Later in the 17th century, followers of Calvin would systematize his theology and go beyond what Calvin himself taught. This system would ultimately be codified through the now famous acrostic TULIP.

The history of Southern Baptists includes those on one side of the theological spectrum who have flatly rejected three or more of Calvin's five points and those at the other who have enthusiastically embraced all of them, with many Baptists falling somewhere in between. The reality is that the SBC has included "Five-Point Calvinists" and "Modified" Calvinists from the start. It should be stressed here that, from a denominational standpoint, in this discussion there is no "right or wrong." Southern Baptists have always been diverse in many regards, and the theological realm is no exception. Neither the Southern Baptist Convention, nor its seminaries, endorse or promote a particular theological system or stance on areas not addressed in the *Baptist Faith and Message*.

Frankly, I don't foresee that ever changing. So what follows is not an endorsement or promotion of Calvinism, but rather a review and condensed explanation of what some of our Southern Baptist brethren believe on the five points of the Calvinistic system. My hope and prayer is that a fuller understanding will help set the stage for what follows in the final section.

Total Depravity

This view holds that man is born with a nature and bent toward sin. Every aspect of man's being is infected with the disease of sin so that he cannot save himself, neither can he move toward God without the initiating and enabling grace of God. Man is not as bad as he could possibly be, but he is radically depraved. Most Baptists would agree on this point, at least in some measure. It is hard to deny it in light of Romans 3:9-20 and Ephesians 2:1-3.

Unconditional Election

According to this view, God, in grace and mercy, has chosen certain persons for salvation. Those who hold this view believe that His decision is not based on human merit or foreseen faith, but in the goodness and providence of God's own will and purposes. Many would add, however, that the electing purpose of God is somehow accomplished without destroying human freewill and responsibility. Accordingly, no one is saved apart from God's plan, and yet anyone who repents and trusts Christ will be saved. The French theologian Moise Amyraut (1596-1664) referred to this as God's secret or hidden decree. There is an admitted tension in this position, but a tension that need not be viewed as contradictory. Calvinists commonly cite John 6:37-47 at this point.

Of course, this view is hotly debated among some Southern Baptists, with alternative interpretations of scriptural passages being offered and both sides genuinely believe they are operating from a biblical basis. The reality is Southern Baptists will likely debate this point until the Lord returns, but there is certainly no need for division or ill will over it.

Limited Atonement

Most Calvinists view this as an unfortunate phrase, preferring the term "particular redemption" instead. The original stance of Calvin's followers was that the intent of the atoning work of Christ was to provide and purchase salvation for the elect. Thus the work of Christ would be *limited* to the elect, and His atonement was made for a *particular* people (*e.g.* His sheep, the Church, His Bride).

This is a real point of contention for many, and, in fact, most Modified Calvinists cannot embrace this teaching in its classic form.

However, let me offer a crucial observation that hopefully will foster some unity on this point. All Bible-believers limit the atonement in some way. To not do so is to advocate Universalism, the view that eventually everyone will be saved. Most Baptists would say the Bible teaches that the atonement is limited in its application, but certainly not its provision. In other words, in His death on the cross Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world (John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4-6; 4:10; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 2:1-2; 4:9-10) making a universal provision. However, the application is limited to those who receive the free gift of salvation offered to them by their personal faith in Christ. One can see then that all evangelicals limit the atonement in some sense, but do so in different ways.

Irresistible Grace

Most Calvinists would see this as another unfortunate choice of words that stirs up unnecessary debate. Instead, they would prefer the phrase "effectual calling." This doctrine asserts that those who are predestined to be saved are called to salvation (Romans 8:30) *effectually* or *effectively*. They are not forced to come but are set free to come and they do so willingly. Timothy George strikes the balance of this teaching with human responsibility when he writes, "God created human beings with free moral agency, and He does not violate this even in the supernatural work of regeneration. Christ does not rudely bludgeon His way into the human heart. He does not abrogate our creaturely freedom. No, he beckons and woos, He pleads and pursues, He waits and wins" (*Amazing Grace*, p. 74).

Perseverance of the Saints

Those God saves, He protects and preserves in their salvation. Baptists have historically referred to this as the doctrine of "eternal security," or in popular terminology as "once saved, always saved." This is one point of Calvinism that almost all Baptists affirm. Sometimes misunderstood and falsely caricatured by those rejecting this doctrine, perseverance of the saints does not teach people can live any way they want and take advantage of God's grace. Rather, because of the greatness of the gift of our salvation, true believers will be grieved when they sin and will pursue a life that is pleasing to the God whom they love and Who keeps them safely in His hand (John 10:27-29).

This is a summary of "five-point Calvinism" or what its advocates call "the Doctrines of Grace." Though it is not as popular among Southern Baptists as it was in the past, there has been a rise in interest in its teachings. And one should honestly acknowledge many wonderful and significant Baptists in the past followed these doctrines. This includes men like William Carey, Andrew Fuller, Luther Rice, Adoniram Judson, Charles Spurgeon, John L. Dagg, Basil Manly Jr., and James Boyce. John Broadus and B. H. Carroll would also have considered themselves Calvinists, though both would have affirmed only four of the five points. They did not advocate particular redemption.

How then should Southern Baptists, with such a rich and diverse theological heritage, respond to this controversial issue at the dawn of the 21st century? As people of The Book who rejoice in a remarkable history, how might we move forward together in unity in the days ahead?

Finding Biblical Balance: Theological and Practical Considerations

Grasping the magnitude of this issue is a daunting task for finite, sinful humans. A good dose of humility is certainly in order. As we attempt to both understand the Bible's teaching and work alongside of those with whom we may not see eye to eye, what are some theological and practical principles that can guide us? I would offer six suggestions.

1 In our doctrine of salvation, we should start with God and not man. The Bible affirms that *salvation is from the Lord* (Jonah 2:9) and *by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift — not from works, so that no one can boast* (Ephesians 2:8-9). We should be God-centered in all of our theology, especially the doctrine of salvation. The Bible teaches that salvation is God's work. He is the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). He takes the initiative. He is the true Seeker!

2 We should affirm the truth both of God's sovereignty and human freewill. "The Abstract of Principles" was the founding confession for The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It was penned by Basil Manly Jr. in 1859. Manly was a Calvinist, and yet Article IV on Providence reveals a healthy, theological balance in our Baptist forefather. Manly wrote:

"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 in any wise to be author or approver of sin nor to destroy *the freewill and responsibility* of intelligent creatures" (*emphasis mine*).

Many Baptists believe the Bible teaches that God predestines and elects persons to salvation, but that He does so in such a way as to do no violence to their freewill and responsibility to repent from sin and believe the Gospel. Is there a tension here? Yes. Is there divine mystery? Absolutely! Many believe this is what Paul felt when, at the end of his magnificent treatment of this subject in Romans 9-11, he concludes with a doxology of praise and says, *Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and*

untraceable His ways (Romans 11:33). If you find it a challenge to fathom the depths of this doctrine then you are in good company!

3 Recognize that extreme positions on either side of the issue are biblically unbalanced, theologically unhealthy, and practically undesirable. Biblically, we affirm the truth of all of God's Word. Words like *called, chosen, election, foreknowledge, and predestination* are in Holy Scripture. We should embrace them, examine them, and seek to understand them, always remembering that intelligent and godly people will likely embrace differing interpretations. Words like *believe, evangelist, go, preach, receive, and repent* are also in the Bible. Biblical balance requires that we embrace and affirm these as well.

Theologically, we dare not be seduced into living in a theological ghetto that may espouse a nice, neat doctrinal system, but that does so at the expense of a wholesome and comprehensive theology.

Practically, we must not become manipulative and gimmicky in our presentation of the Gospel as if the conversion of the lost depends ultimately, or even primarily, on us. Neither should we be lulled into an antipathy toward personal evangelism and global missions. Attempting to construct a doctrine of double predestination wherein God elects some to damnation, hates the lost, and consigns non-elect infants to the fires of hell would be viewed by most in the SBC as irresponsible and lacking in biblical support. Any theology that does not result in a "hot heart" for the souls of lost persons is a theology not worth having. I fear that some extreme forms of Calvinism have so warped the mind and frozen the heart of its advocates that if they saw a person screaming at the top of their lungs "what must I do to be saved?", they would hesitate or even neglect the Gospel for fear of somehow interfering with the work of the Holy Spirit.

If the initials J.C. bring first to your mind the name John Calvin rather than Jesus Christ and you fancy yourself more of an evangelist for Calvinism than Christ, then this latter word of concern is particularly for you. Never forget that the greatest theologian who ever lived was also the greatest missionary/evangelist who ever lived. His name is Paul.

4 Act with personal integrity in your ministry when it comes to this issue. Put your theological cards on the table in plain view for all to see, and do not go into a church under a cloak of deception or dishonesty. If you do, you will more than likely split a church, wound the Body of Christ, damage the ministry God has given you, and leave a bad taste in the mouth of everyone. Let me give an example. I am pre-tribulational/premillennial in my eschatology. It would be inappropriate for me to interview with a church and continue the discussion if I discovered that it was committed to an amillennial position.

Now, let me address our topic. If a person is strongly committed to five-point Calvinism, then he should be honest and transparent about that when talking to a church search committee. He should not hide behind statements like "I am a historic Baptist." That statement basically says very little if anything and it is less than forthcoming. Be honest and completely so. If it is

determined you are not a good fit for that congregation, rejoice in the sovereign providence of God and trust Him to place you in a ministry assignment that is a good fit. God will honor such integrity.

5 Teach the issues to your people, especially your youth. Sometimes pastors get frustrated when they send their students off to college and seminary, and they come back different. Sometimes they go to a liberal institution, and they return questioning or jettisoning the faith. Other times they go to a conservative school and return as double predestinarian, supralapsarian extreme Calvinists. They now question the public invitation and personal evangelism training and redefine into insignificance the Great Commission. It has been my experience that this latter malady is more often caught from immature fellow students than from godly professors.

This observation is not intended to absolve our colleges and seminaries of their responsibility. It is to say, however, that we do our people no favors with a dumbed-down theology in the local church. I believe we should raise the biblical and theological bar in our churches, and we should do so immediately. I believe we should train our people so they mature to the point that we can consider the great theological debates between Augustine and Pelagius, Luther/Calvin and Erasmus, Calvinists and Arminians.

I also believe we should help them mature to the point that we can familiarize them with the five points of Calvinism, the humanism of the Enlightenment, and the destructive criticism of rationalism/antisupernaturalism and the Jesus Seminar.

Some may protest that these issues will be over their heads. I would strongly disagree. If our schools can teach our children chemistry and biology, physics and geology, algebra and geometry, political science and economics, then we can certainly teach them theology and apologetics, Christian ethics and philosophy. We, as the local church, can prepare them in advance for what they will encounter so that various ideologies can be carefully critiqued and extreme positions intelligently rejected for the errors they contain. Again, it requires a gradual and intentional maturing process — you don't teach calculus to a first grader — but to neglect this area is to fail in preparing them to deal with the critical theological and social challenges of our day.

6 Recognize that our *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* is a well-constructed canopy under which varying perspectives on this issue can peacefully and helpfully co-exist. Pelagians, Arminians, and Open Theists will not feel at home in our Southern Baptist family. We will love them while also disagreeing with them. Is there a place for differing positions on the issues of election, the extent of the atonement and calling, as well as how we do missions, evangelism, and give the invitation? I am convinced that the answer is yes.

Further, I believe we will be the better for it theologically and practically as we engage each other in respectful and serious conversation. As one who considers himself to be a true compatibilist, affirming the majestic mystery of both divine sovereignty and human

responsibility, I have been challenged and strengthened in my own theological understanding by those less reformed than I as well as those more reformed than I happen to be. Because of our passionate commitments to the glory of God, the Lordship of Christ, biblical authority, salvation by grace through faith, and the Great Commission, we work in wonderful harmony with each other, and I suspect we always will.

7 Finally, as a denomination we must devote as much passion and energy to *studying* the Word as we have to *defending* it. Let us be known for being rigorously biblical, searching the Scriptures to determine what God really says on this and other key doctrinal issues. For the most part, we are not doing this, and our theological shallowness is an indictment of our current state and an embarrassment to our history! Furthermore, let none of us seek to be recognized so much for being Calvinists — five-point, modified, or otherwise — but rather for being thoroughgoing Biblicists and devoted followers of Jesus Christ!

Conclusion

The great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon was a five-point Calvinist. He was also a passionate evangelist and soul winner. On August 1, 1858, he preached a sermon entitled, "Sovereign Grace and Man's Responsibility." The words of wisdom that flowed from his mouth on that day could only come from a capable pastor/theologian with a shepherd's heart and a love for the lost. We would do well to heed the counsel of this Baptist hero upon whose shoulders we stand today.

"I see in one place, God presiding over all in providence; and yet I see and I cannot help seeing, that man acts as he pleases, and that God has left his actions to his own will, in a great measure. Now, if I were to declare that man was so free to act, that there was no precedence of God over his actions, I should be driven very near to Atheism; and if, on the other hand, I declare that God so overrules all things, as that man is not free enough to be responsible, I am driven at once into Antinomianism or fatalism. That God predestines, and that man is responsible, are two things that few can see. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory; but they are not. It is just the fault of our weak judgment. Two truths cannot be contradictory to each other. If, then, I find taught in one place that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find in another place that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is my folly that leads me to imagine that two truths can ever contradict each other. These two truths, I do not believe, can ever be welded into one upon any human anvil, but one they shall be in eternity: they are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the mind that shall pursue them farthest, will never discover that they converge; but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring You ask me to reconcile the two. I answer, they do not want any reconciliation; I never tried to reconcile them to myself, because I could never see a discrepancy Both are true; no two truths can be inconsistent with each other; and what you have to do is to believe them both."

Here is a good place to stand. Here is a theology we can all affirm in service to our Savior.

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"Beware of becoming enamored with any particular theological system lest it deteriorate into a doctrinal greenhouse that cultivates theological arrogance, which, when in full bloom, produces a fragrance that is sweet in the nostrils of Satan, but is at once a revolting stench in the nostrils of God."

Glossary of Theological Terms

Editor's note: *While most pastors would recognize and understand the theological terms used in these articles, we have a growing number of readers who have not had formal theological training and might be unfamiliar with such terms and phrases as these.*

Calvinism - A theological tradition named after sixteenth-century French reformer John Calvin that emphasizes the sovereignty of God in all things, man's inability to do spiritual good before God, and the glory of God as the highest end of all that occurs.

Doctrines of grace - Another term for the theological tradition commonly referred to as Calvinism.

Arminianism - A theological tradition named after seventeenth-century theologian Jacob Arminius that seeks to preserve the free choices of human beings and denies God's providential control over the details of all events.

Supralapsarianism - The belief held by some Calvinists that God decided first that He would save some people then decided to allow sin to enter the world so He could save them from it.

Double predestination - The belief that God predestines some to salvation and others to damnation.

Atonement - The work Christ did in His life and death to earn our salvation.

Providence - The doctrine that God is continually involved with all created things so that He maintains their existence, guides their actions, and directs them to fulfill His purposes.

Pre-tribulational/pre-millennial - The view that God will rapture believers into heaven secretly during Christ's first return prior to the great tribulation.

Amillennial - The view that there will be no literal thousand-year bodily reign of Christ on earth prior to the final judgment and the eternal state.

Pelagians - Those holding the theological beliefs of the fifth-century monk Pelagius, who believed that man has the ability to obey God's commands and take the first steps to salvation without God's assistance.

Open Theists - Those who believe that God does not know with certainty all future events.

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