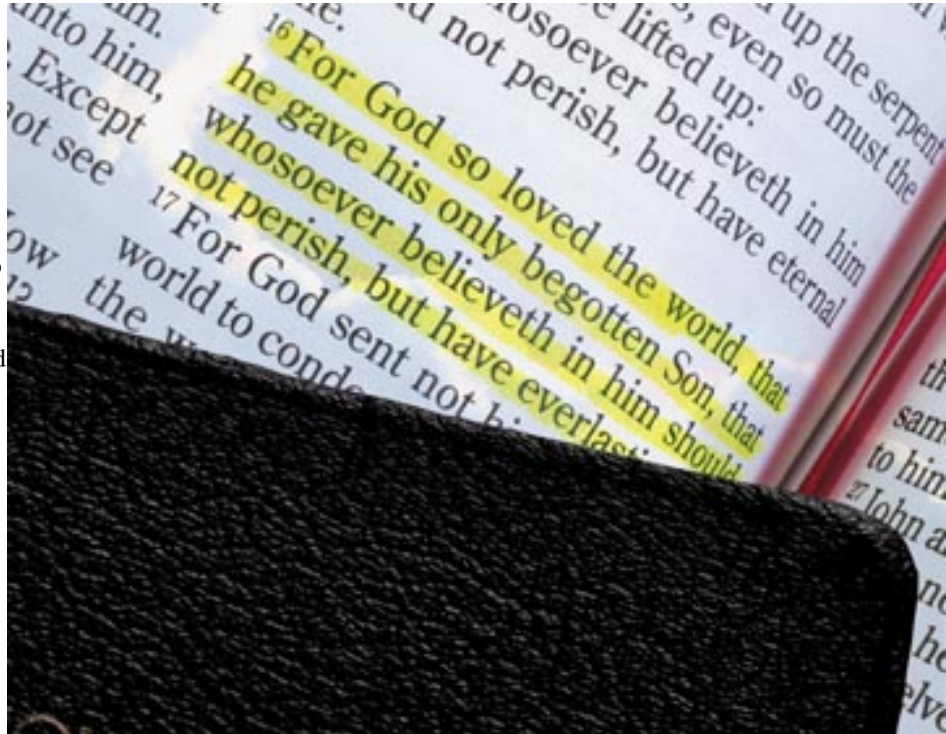


Calvinism ~ Southern Baptist Perspectives

by John Revell

It is no secret that, over the last thirty years, the presence and influence of Calvinism has grown within the Southern Baptist Convention. While there are those who are concerned over the theological stance and the trend of its growing presence and popularity, some enthusiastically welcome it.

Article V, "God's Purpose of Grace," in the *Baptist Faith and Message* (BF&M) states:



Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility.

All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end. Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, and bring reproach on the cause of Christ and temporal judgments on themselves; yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

This statement, reaching back to the original BF&M in 1925 and to the *New Hampshire Confession of Faith* upon which it was based, accomplishes a significant feat; it accommodates the soteriological convictions of both Calvinists and non-Calvinists within the SBC family.

While the tensions and debates regarding Calvinism are ever present in Baptist life, they have intensified in recent years. As a result, in the last three years Southern Baptist leaders have hosted two different conferences to address the issue. The first, in 2007, was entitled "Building Bridges Conference: Southern Baptists and Calvinism," and was sponsored by Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS) and Founders Ministries and hosted at Ridgecrest Conference Center by LifeWay Christian Resources.



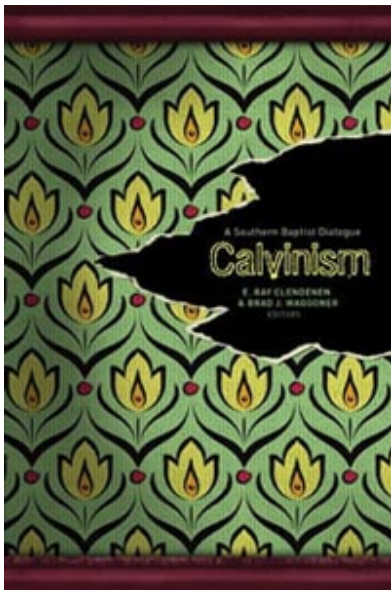
Approximately 550 attendees participated in the three-day conference.

The second was "The John 3:16 Conference" in 2008, sponsored by Jerry Vines Ministries, and co-sponsored by New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SWBTS), Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, Luther Rice Seminary, and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. It was hosted by First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Georgia, with about 1,000 attendees at the two-day conference.

Each conference resulted in a book that committed the primary addresses to text and presented them in chapter form. Both books were published by B&H Academic, a division of B&H Publishing Group of LifeWay Christian Resources.

In this article, we will survey each book, particularly the emphases of the chapters that resulted from corresponding presentations at the respective conferences.

Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue



The first conference was the "Building Bridges Conference," and the resulting book was *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue*, edited by E. Ray Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner, published in 2008. The conference and book essentially offered a point and counterpoint presentation of key issues, such as the history of Calvinism in the SBC, a general evaluation of the impact of Calvinism upon the SBC, differing views on the atonement, the existence of theological stereotypes, and differing views on God's election and calling.

In the first section, "Calvinism, The Current Climate," Ed Stetzer wrote a lead in paper entitled "Calvinism, Evangelism, and SBC Leadership." Stetzer, vice president for research and ministry development with LifeWay Christian Resources, confirmed the notion that the number of Calvinists among Southern Baptists is growing. He presented the findings from surveys by LifeWay Christian Resources and the North American Mission Board. Included in the findings:

- about 10 percent of Southern Baptist leaders identify themselves as five-point Calvinists, while about 30 percent of recent seminary graduates identify themselves as such;
- congregations led by Calvinists tend to show smaller attendance and baptize fewer people each year, but their baptism rate (the ratio of membership to the number of people baptized) is virtually identical to that of non-Calvinists;
- the priority of church planting is virtually the same between Calvinists and non-Calvinists.¹

The second section, "Calvinism, The Historical Record," offers two perspectives on the role Calvinists have played in the history of the SBC. David Dockery, president of Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, demonstrated in his chapter that the history of the SBC is filled with key leaders who embraced Calvinism. He traced the flow of Calvinists from the Charleston Association, founded in 1742, with its emphasis on confessional theology, strong support for education, and quasi-liturgical worship. He also traced the flow of those who embraced revivalism, suspicion of education, and "Spirit-led" worship to the Sandy Creek Association founded about ten years later. While acknowledging the influence of non-Calvinists, Dockery

demonstrated the substantial contributions Calvinists have made in the shaping and development of the SBC.

Tom Nettles, professor of historical theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, addressed the doctrinal importance of Calvinism among Baptists over the course of history. He emphasized that historically Baptist Calvinists have been consistent advocates of:

- divine inspiration of Scripture;
- a fully Trinitarian theology;
- substitutionary atonement;
- religious liberty;
- missions and evangelism;
- Christ-centered preaching;
- holiness of life; and
- regenerate church membership;

In the next section, "Calvinism, General Evaluation," Malcolm Yarnell and Jeff Noblit gave differing perspectives of the benefits versus the potential dangers of Calvinism in the SBC. Yarnell, director of the Center for Theological Research at SWBTS in Fort Worth, Texas, pointed out the distinctions between Classical Calvinism, Baptist Calvinism, and Hyper-Calvinism. He referenced the anti-missionary mindset of the first and third groups and warned Baptist Calvinists of the danger of a theological system that drifts from the clear teachings of Scripture and that abandons central Baptist distinctives. He then pointed to reasons for rejoicing, as well as causes for concern, regarding how Calvinists have addressed essential Baptist beliefs regarding Jesus Christ, the Bible, the Gospel, the Church, and the Christian life.

Senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Muscle Shoals, Alabama, Noblit pointed to what he believes are seven reasons Southern Baptists should rejoice in the rise of Calvinism in the SBC, for he sees the rise of Calvinism as an instrument the Lord could use to bring revival and reformation "our churches need to bring Him the glory He deserves." He suggested that the rise of Calvinism would help in:

- overcoming "inerrancy idolatry" (holding to the inerrancy of God's Word without practicing its sufficiency) and reclaiming the sufficiency of Scripture;
- producing "better" church splits (churches born out of a struggle for biblical integrity);
- exposing and removing covert liberalism;
- restoring true evangelism;
- energizing and mobilizing Christian youth;

- returning churches to biblical models of ministry; and
- increasing the focus on glorifying God.

In the fourth section, "Calvinism, The Atonement," David Nelson and Sam Waldron tackled the thorny issue of what Calvinists often refer to as "limited atonement." Nelson is senior vice president of academic administration and professor of theology at SEBTS in Wake Forest, North Carolina. He argued for unlimited atonement — that is, the Lord's death on the cross was payment for the sins of all mankind. In so doing, he covered several key passages in support of his stance. He also warned Calvinists of the danger of holding to limited atonement primarily because it logically flows from their view of the elective decree of God.

Waldron, academic dean and professor of theology at the Midwest Center for Theological Studies at Owensboro, Kentucky, argued for limited atonement, otherwise referred to as "particular redemption." He presented his arguments, supported them logically, treated a number of passages in support of his stance, and answered common arguments against particular redemption.

In "Calvinism, Theological Stereotypes," Chuck Lawless, dean of the Billy Graham School of Mission, Evangelism, and Church Growth at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and Nathan Finn, instructor of Church History at SEBTS, addressed popular, but inaccurate, stereotypes. Lawless addressed and refuted four stereotypes of non-Calvinists, that they:

- are more concerned about numbers than theology;
- promote pragmatic church growth;
- use faulty approaches to evangelism and are unconcerned about regenerate church membership; and
- do not like Calvinists.

Finn addressed and refuted five myths about Southern Baptist Calvinism:

- Calvinism is a threat to evangelism;
- Calvinists are against invitations;
- five-point Calvinism is hyper-Calvinism;
- Calvinists deny free will; and
- authentic Baptists are not Calvinists.

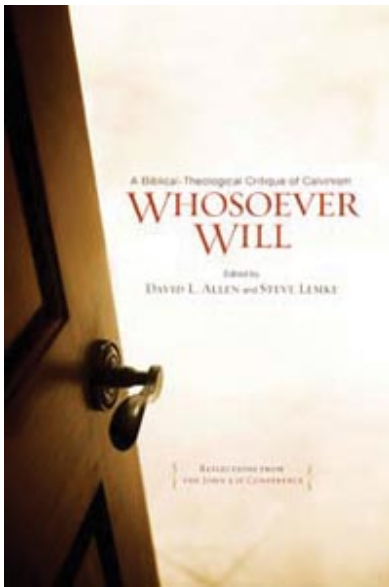
The fifth and final doctrinal section is "Calvinism, Election and Calling." Ken Keathley, senior associate dean and professor of theology at SEBTS, challenged the Calvinist tenet of "unconditional election," offering and explaining an alternative: the Molinist view. This view focuses more on God's knowledge and omniscience than His decrees. It acknowledges the Reformed understanding of God's natural knowledge (His knowledge of all of that which is true in the actual realm as well as that which is true of the all potential scenarios) and His free knowledge (His knowledge of everything in this particular world because He freely chose for it to be this way). But then it posits a third realm of knowledge, described as "middle

knowledge." It is there, according to Molinists, that God considers the free choices of man and melds them without contradiction to His sovereign plan.²

Greg Welty, assistant professor of philosophy at SWBTS, offered the traditional Reformed explanation for election, that God's election is not based upon an individual's deeds or their foreseen faith. He then provided scriptural support for his stance and answered typical challenges to unconditional election. In the second half of his chapter, he addressed effectual calling (avoiding the common Calvinist term "irresistible grace"), defending the view that if God issues an "inner" call (as opposed to an external call that every person receives) it "always produces repentance and faith, and therefore secures salvation."³ He went on to interpret John 6:64-65 as teaching that the only way a person can come to Christ is if he/she is drawn specifically through this kind of efficacious calling, to which the person most certainly would respond affirmatively.⁴

The book closed with Danny Akin, president of SEBTS, and Tom Ascol, senior pastor of Grace Bible Church in Cape Coral, Florida, and executive director of Founders Ministries, identifying essential components around which Southern Baptist Calvinists and non-Calvinists can — and should — unite for the sake of the cause of Christ.

Whosoever Will



The "John 3:16 Conference" resulted in the book *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, edited by David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke, published in 2010. The first part of the book presented edited forms of the addresses offered at the conference; the second part of the book offered additional perspectives. This article will focus on the first part, which essentially corresponds to each of the five points of traditional Calvinism: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.

Chapter 1 by Jerry Vines, president of Jerry Vines Ministries and pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, Florida, introduced the entire discussion with an exposition of John 3:16. In it, he stressed four main points from the text, backing each with extensive exegesis:

- God's love is global;
- God's love is sacrificial;
- God's love is personal; and
- God's love is eternal.

In chapter 2, Paige Patterson, president, professor of theology, and L.R. Scarborough Chair of Evangelism at SWBTS, addressed total depravity. He made the point that Scripture indeed teaches that humans are dreadfully sinful and will not/cannot seek God on their own. He provided scriptural support for the reality, the meaning, and the source of depravity. However, he also offered support for his view that depravity does not totally render a person incapable of calling out to God in a desperate plea for salvation.

Oxford-trained theologian Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, addressed election in Chapter 3 — "Congruent Election: Understanding Election from an 'Eternal Now'"

Perspective." In his treatment, he traced the history of Baptists beliefs concerning election, suggesting that most Baptists have been neither "fully Calvinists" nor "remotely Arminian," but rather remaining "different and distinct from both."

Then he introduced his own perspective, which he labeled "congruent election," a relatively unknown view of election based upon the eternality of God. He linked it to what C.S. Lewis called "the eternal now" of God — the fact that God is not confined to time as we are, but rather views all things past, present, and future (from a human perspective) as existing in the present for Him.

Therefore, while we are inclined to view the events of salvation on a timeline, God's calling in eternity past and a person's response in the present all take place in His eternal now.⁵

Chapter 4 was written by David Allen, professor of preaching, director of the Southwestern Center for Expository Preaching, George W. Truett Chair of Ministry, and dean of the School of Theology at SWBTS. He tackled the issue of whether the atonement is limited or universal.

In an extensive and comprehensive treatment, he made a solid case for his view that Christ died for the sins of all humans, not merely for the sins of the elect. Pointing out that Calvin himself rejected such a view, he made a case historically, exegetically, logically, and practically against limited atonement.

The longest chapter in the book, Chapter 5, is entitled "A Biblical and Theological Critique of Irresistible Grace." In it, Steve Lemke, provost and professor of Philosophy and Ethics at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in New Orleans, Louisiana, provided extensive arguments against the Calvinist position. He gave a thorough treatment of key passages and theological issues, challenging the view that a person must respond affirmatively to God's call.

Kenneth Keathley addressed "Perseverance and Assurance of the Saints" in Chapter 6. He rejected what Calvinists and Arminians alike point to for assurance — evidence of practical sanctification — and suggested instead that assurance is tied to one's justification in Christ. His model is based on four primary points:

- the essential basis for assurance is the objective work of Christ;
- assurance is the essence of saving faith (that a certain knowledge of salvation is simultaneous with being saved);
- saving faith perseveres or remains until the day when it gives way to sight; and
- rewards subsequent to salvation are for the believer to win or lose.

Conclusion

Both books reflect strong convictions that correspond to a deep commitment to the Person and Work of Jesus Christ as well as a high regard and profound respect for God's Word. Both highlight the need for aggressive and passionate evangelism.

Both emphasize the priority of unity of purpose in the midst of theological diversity and the application of love in the midst of doctrinal differences. Both acknowledge the historical reality of Calvinism in the history of the SBC. Both warn against extremism as well as the tendency to stereotype those in other camps.

And for those who might be inclined to take a hard stand on one side or the other, each book offers critical insights into the issue that should help prevent doctrinal hostility and cultivate a genuine camaraderie in the cause of the Gospel and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

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1. See pages 13-24 for extensive charts and statistics given in support of the points.
 2. Space does not permit a full or fair explanation of this view ... to properly do justice to this perspective it is necessary to read the section in its entirety.
 3. In a quote of John L. Dagg on page 235.
 4. Pages 237-239.
 5. Again, space does not permit a full or fair explanation of this view ... to properly do justice to this perspective it is necessary to read the section in its entirety.

John Revell is a member of Long Hollow Baptist Church in Hendersonville, Tennessee, and editor of SBC LIFE.