

## **A Review of Calvinism and Southern Baptists**

By Dr. Nelson L. Price

The Way We Were is a well researched work by Dr. Fisher Humphreys on trends in Southern Baptist theology through the years. This is a review of the portion of the book dealing with “Calvinistic Belief,” a current hot topic among Southern Baptists.

He dates the initial encounter between the emerging Baptists movement and the synod of Dort in the Netherlands (1618-1619) and the five articles crafted there. From the beginning the Baptist made it clear they opposed the confessions adopted there by the Dutch church. The five Canons of Dort are summarized by the acronym TULIP standing for:

Total depravity  
Unconditional grace  
Limited atonement  
Irresistible grace and the  
Preservation of the saints.

The last of these is the primary one with which the original Baptists agreed as do most present day Baptists. The other four tenants are held by a vocal minority of Baptists.

Calvinists point out various Christian leaders who adhered to their beliefs. A far larger number can be noted who disagree with them. It is not a matter of who believes what but the validity of what is believed that matters. These held by an articulate minority of Baptists are presented with viable objectivity.

### **GOD UNCONDITIONALLY ELECTS SOME PEOPLE TO BE SAVED**

Calvinists believe in what is known as “double predestination,” that is God predestined how people would respond to Him and foreknew they would respond. Baptists cannot reconcile this idea with such texts as II Peter 3:9 “the Lord is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance...” and I Timothy 2:4 stating God “will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.”

In general Baptists believe God chose to save those who would of their own free will put their faith in Christ. They do not believe God in His sovereignty arbitrarily decided who would be saved and who damned. They believe God wants all people to be saved but will not override their free will given them by God.

Southern Baptists in general believe that to hold the Calvinistic view would result in their loss of evangelism and soul winning missions efforts.

### **CHRIST DIED FOR THE ELECT ONLY**

Calvinists believe in “penal substitution” regarding Christ’s death. They believe that Christ died for only the elect. This is called “limited atonement” in that they believe the atonement is limited in that it was intended only for the elect.

Baptists believe in “general atonement,” that is Christ died for all sinners and by their free will they determine whether to respond to it receptively in faith. Only a minority of Baptists believe Christ died just for the elect.

#### ALL PEOPLE ARE TOTALLY DEPRAVED

Calvinists believe that since all persons are spiritually dead they cannot repent and respond to God. They hold that a person must first be born again then they can respond to God in faith and repent.

Most Baptists agree no one can save him or her self. They believe salvation is all by God’s grace through faith in Christ. Repentance and faith are held by them not to contribute to salvation but are the means whereby the all sufficient grace of God is received. There is no merit in receiving grace. All merit is in grace being given by God.

#### GOD’S GRACE IS IRRESISTIBLE

Calvinists believe God’s grace cannot be resisted by those chosen by God to be saved. Calvinists believe that if this is not true God is not sovereign.

Southern Baptists in general believe that God’s grace can be resisted and this results in a person not being saved. They also believe in the sovereignty of God and that He sovereignly gave man a free will with which to respond or not respond. They believe that for God to give such freedom and then respect it does not constitute a diminishment of the sovereignty of God but a recognition of the way in which the sovereign God has chosen to relate to human beings.

#### PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Southern Baptists are in general agreement on the concept of the security of the believer known as “once saved always saved” or preservation of the saints.

There is a slight semantic difference in what Calvinists believe on this topic. They believe in the perseverance of the saints.

(The following two paragraphs are a sidebar to the book review.)<  
Put side by side the difference becomes clear.

<b>SOUTHERN BAPTIST</b>	<b>CALVINIST</b>
Preservation of the saints	Perseverance of the saints
God does it	Man does it
It is based on God's promises	It is based on man's performance
It is absolute	It is relative

Contrary to the concept of "it is all about grace" this last point actually means the Calvinists position on the subject is works based. This leaves some Calvinists hoping they have done enough good work. Baptist know for sure God has done a perfect work.

When the Southern Baptist Convention was organized in 1845 five traditions were represented. One was known as the Charleston tradition, which was Calvinistic. The Sandy Creek tradition discounted Calvinism and emphasized evangelism. The Georgia tradition represented the Southern regionalism of the Convention. The Tennessee tradition emphasized the distinctiveness of Baptists churches. The Southwest tradition stressed evangelical-denominationalism. The Convention sided against the Calvinist tradition and with the evangelical persuasion. The Sandy Creek tradition prevailed. That is the doctrinal foundation of most Southern Baptist churches. Their heritage is other than Calvinistic. There have always been some in the ranks of Southern Baptists with Calvinistic leanings. Some are people of note. However, the denomination in general has always supported the position of its founders who sided against the Calvinistic tradition.

Humphreys concluded that in light of this Southern Baptists who resist Calvinism may be called traditional Baptists in the sense that the first Baptist resisted Calvinism, and in the sense that today most Southern Baptists resist it.

THE WAY WE WERE, by Fisher Humphreys, Smyth & Helwys, Macon, Georgia, revised 2002, pp. 67-73.