

As Baptists Prepare to Meet, Calvinism Debate Shifts to Heresy Accusation

Hundreds, including seminary presidents, have signed a statement on salvation criticized by both Reformed and Arminian theologians. Weston Gentry/ June 18, 2012, "Christianity Today Magazine"

A statement by a non-Calvinist faction of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has launched infighting within the nation's largest Protestant denomination, and tensions are expected to escalate Tuesday as church leaders descend on New Orleans.

While the election of the denomination's [first African American president](#) in its 167-year history will dominate the meeting's headlines, water-cooler talk is sure to be fixated on a theological dirty word that, for the past two weeks, has spiked the blood pressure of theologians as much as it has Baptist visits to Wikipedia.

The May 30 document, "[A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation](#)," aims "to more carefully express what is generally believed by Southern Baptists about salvation." But both Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president Albert Mohler and George W. Truett Theological Seminary professor Roger Olson, in separate blog posts, said that parts of the document sound like semi-Pelagianism, a traditionally heretical understanding of Christian salvation.

One sliver of the document's second article particularly drew their ire. It reads, "We deny that Adam's sin resulted in the incapacitation of any person's free will."

Even though the two scholars represent opposite ends of the evangelical spectrum on salvation, both made essentially the same allegation: the wording seems, at best, theologically careless and, at worst, represents a heretical understanding of sin, human nature, and the human will.

"This is what many laypeople believe that they shouldn't, and pastors and theologians should be correcting," Olson said. "My surprise is that the framers of this statement didn't immediately go back and rewrite it because it is so obviously and blatantly semi-Pelagian."

Olson, a classical Arminian and author of the book *Against Calvinism*, is unaffiliated with the SBC, but has long asserted that most evangelicals — not just Southern Baptists — adhere to a sort of semi-Pelagian "folk religion," whose origins can be traced to the Second Great Awakening and revivalists in the mold of Charles Finney.

He believes the new document proves his thesis.

"Traditional Christian doctrine, since Augustine anyway, has always been that people need a special infusion of God's grace to be able to respond to the gospel — both Calvinists and classical Arminians agree on that," he said. "They haven't addressed that here at all."

Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, denies the charge.

"We are obviously not semi-Pelagians," Patterson said. "We do believe that the entire human race is badly affected by the fall of Adam. However, we don't follow the Reformed view that man is so crippled by the fall that he has no choice."

Patterson didn't assist in the framing of the document, but was one of six former SBC presidents and two SBC seminary presidents to affirm it.

At last count, more than 650 other Southern Baptists, ranging from laymen to SBC state directors, have [signed](#) the more specific articulation of a "Traditional Southern Baptist" soteriology in an effort to rebuff the "[New Calvinism](#)" — a movement whose growth, both in and beyond the SBC, garnered it a spot on Time's 2009 list of "10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now."

A just-released survey conducted by LifeWay Research found that roughly equal numbers of SBC pastors identify their congregation as Calvinist/Reformed (30%) or Arminian/Wesleyan (30%). More than 60 percent are concerned about Calvinism's influence on the denomination.

A 2006 [Lifeway survey](#) found that only 10 percent of SBC pastors identified themselves as "five-point Calvinists." However, a similar [2007 study](#) of young ministers by the SBC's North American Mission Board discovered that almost 35 percent of SBC ministers that graduated from SBC seminaries in 2004 and 2005 self-identified as "five-point Calvinists."

"We needed to assure other young, non-Calvinists that they were not alone," Patterson said in relation to the document's timing and content.

Eric Hankins, the primary author of the statement, said he expected backlash when he posted it to the SBC Today website.

"The statement's language displeases our Calvinist and Arminian friends not because it is heterodox, but because their terminology and categories are not employed," he said. "That's all the charge of semi-Pelagianism really means: 'You aren't following our rules. You have to pick.'"

"Well," Hankins said, "we beg to differ."

Hankins said his formulation, which was an adaptation of a paper he wrote for the Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry earlier this year, "[Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: Toward a Baptist Soteriology](#)," was an attempt to make a complex topic more accessible to pastors and laymen.

The 40-year-old pastor of First Baptist Church Oxford, Mississippi, said he doesn't see an immediate need to revise the statement because it wields no binding authority.

While acknowledging Hankins's right to produce the document, Owen Strachan, a 31-year-old assistant professor of Christian theology and church history at Boyce College, said many young Calvinists in the SBC believe it wasn't necessary because they already have a "big tent" theological agreement with non-Calvinists under the Baptist Faith & Message.

"I'm all for leaders finding ways to enfranchise these brothers and sisters [non-Calvinists in the SBC], but this statement is tough," he said. "It's a confrontational document, which effectively aims to push away many of us who love the SBC."

There are no plans for an official salvation dialogue to take place at the conference this week, but Strachan said the meeting's democratic nature makes it ripe for an unpredictable agenda.

"I don't necessarily think the floor of the convention would be the best place for the cool-headed, rational debate that this issue deserves," he said. "Even if doesn't come up, this has already created a sense of unease in the SBC."