

Mohler: Southern Baptists need ‘table manners’ when discussing Calvinism

Reported by James A. Smith, Sr.— November 15, 2013



Southern Baptists need to “learn the table manners of denominational life” when discussing the controversial issue of Calvinism, R. Albert Mohler Jr. said during a Nov. 7 “conversation” with Mississippi pastor Eric Hankins at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Mohler, president of Southern Seminary, and Hankins, pastor of First Baptist Church in Oxford, Miss., co-chaired a 19-member Calvinism Advisory Committee that issued an unanimous report in May to Executive Committee President Frank Page, who assembled the group, acknowledging tension and disagreement within the Southern Baptist Convention. The report urged Southern Baptists to “grant one another liberty” on Calvinism while joining arms for the Great Commission.

In recent years, a debate about Calvinism, a term associated with the doctrine of salvation taught by 16th century theologian, John Calvin, has generated controversy within the SBC, with each side of the debate convening conferences, publishing books and issuing theological statements. Mohler holds to Calvinistic soteriology. Hankins was the primary author of “A Statement of Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation,” issued in 2012 as an alternative to Calvinism.

Mohler invited Hankins to hold the public discussion before students and faculty in order to model how Southern Baptists who differ on the often-contentious issue can dialogue with each other while remaining committed to working together. Hankins also preached in Southern Seminary chapel earlier in the day.

Throughout the hour-long conversation, both men affirmed the need for Southern Baptists on both sides of the debate to exercise humility and show grace to those who disagree.

“We have to learn the table manners of denominational life,” Mohler said. “There is a certain etiquette and kindness that is required, just like in the family reunion.”

The Southern Baptist family is made up of Calvinists and those who are not, he said.

“The decision to be a Southern Baptist is the decision to work with the people” on both sides of the debate, Mohler said. “We should not be surprised by differences of understanding of the issues that are comfortably

within the Baptist Faith and Message,” he added, citing the SBC’s confession of faith, most recently revised in 2000.

Hankins said, “There’s been too much ugliness,” noting a friend warned him before issuing the “traditionalist” statement that “Calvinists will maul you. ... And he was right.”

“That goes both ways,” Mohler responded, to which Hankins replied, “I absolutely acknowledge that.”

Both men agreed that terminology and labels are significant hurdles to better understanding on both sides of the debate.

Hankins flatly rejected the term “Arminian” to describe his theology due to Arminianism’s rejection of eternal security of the believer, among other reasons.

Arminianism is named for late 16th century Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius who rejected some tenets of John Calvin’s theology of salvation. His followers, known as the “Remonstrants,” issued their views in 1610, to which followers of Calvin responded in the Synod of Dort in 1619. Both Calvinists and Arminians express their convictions with five points addressing various aspects of salvation.

Hankins also said “non-Calvinist” is not a good term — one he “hates” — while conceding, “We do not have good terms.”

Hankins said he used “traditionalist” to attempt to describe his views in contrast to Calvinism, although he acknowledged the term is offensive to some Calvinists.

“I wasn’t trying to insult anyone. I was just trying to come up with a name. ... I hope to figure out some way to talk about what the distinctions are, but I don’t have a good answer to that question,” he said.

Mohler said, “I am troubled at times and challenged perpetually about what language to use,” noting the term “Reformed” carries its own misunderstandings.

Hankins said most Southern Baptists who hold to less than four points of classical Calvinism do not consider themselves Calvinists. Mohler noted, however, that Southern Seminary’s confession of faith, the Abstract of Principles, only requires adherence to three points of Calvinism: total depravity, unconditional election and perseverance of the saints. The other two points of Calvinism are limited (or particular) atonement and irresistible (or effectual) grace.

“So it is a very interesting thing in that I think most people would look at the Abstract of Principles and say it was Calvinist, and I think that would be right,” Mohler said, adding that “from the very beginning” of the seminary, there were faculty “who were more or less Calvinist on some of these very questions.”

Hankins said a “real problem” is Calvinists who consider his soteriological views to be “deficient.” That attitude “propelled me to say something,” responding to what he considered to be a new “tone” among Calvinists.

Mohler responded, “Well, I do think your soteriology is deficient,” while adding that in truth Hankins would say the same about his soteriology.

He said “theological humility” requires both sides to acknowledge “we’re doing the very best we can.”

Mohler said those who hold to all five points of Calvinism and those who do not are still capable of cooperating together in the Great Commission and other ministries, as long as they can both affirm the Baptist Faith and Message.

Mohler and Hankins agreed that the BF&M in its current form is sufficient for both sides of the debate.

“I need to say publicly in this conversation with you — I do not want our Baptist Faith and Message to be any narrower than it is now,” Mohler said. Hankins responded, “I sense zero interest in having the Baptist Faith and Message be this battleground and we’re going to fix it there.”

Mohler asked Hankins to outline areas of Calvinist “misbehavior.”

Hankins said Calvinists should not dismiss those who disagree with them as “stupid.” Some young, aggressive Calvinists make older pastors who reject Calvinism “feel inadequate.”

Hankins noted, “Those who hold to non-Calvinism can do so with a robust seriousness about the sovereignty of God, a robust seriousness [about] the absolute ruination of sin over humankind, and the singularity of the gospel in bringing about salvation and the absolute necessity of the prior working of the Holy Spirit to bring about salvation.”

Another problem are Calvinists who fail to disclose their convictions when under consideration by pulpit committees, Hankins said.

He said search committees should move beyond a yes or no question, “Are you a Calvinist?” on pastoral search questionnaires. “And if you check, yes, they’re going to wad it up and throw it in the trash, which does not need to happen,” he said.

Mohler responded that it’s good that young believers are interested in these issues. “I don’t think you can be too excited about theology or the truths of God’s Word,” he said. “You can just be too excited about your system.”

He added, “If there’s a young, Reformed guy who’s more interested in traveling across the state to argue about John Calvin when he’s not talking to his next-door neighbor about the gospel, then there’s a huge problem.”

Hankins suggested a “rule” for both sides of the debate: “You only get seven days to talk about [Calvinism] and for another seven days you have to actually share the gospel.” The truth, he added, all Southern Baptists are failing to share the gospel.

Hankins said his hope for the future of the SBC is based on cooperation to carry out the Great Commission.

“The concept of cooperating together to do the work of missions and evangelism is beautiful and it’s brilliant,” he said, adding that seminarians need to be engaged in the denomination. “This seminary exists because of that cooperative movement.”

Mohler said in a “post-Christian culture” all Southern Baptists “need each other because we’re going to be up against unbelievable ethical, moral, leadership, discipleship challenges. ... I feel right now we desperately need one another and we need the resources we all bring to this.”

He added, “What we need to think about is what it means to have healthy gospel churches in a hostile culture ready to be faithful to Christ.”

In his chapel sermon, Hankins preached about “A Great Commission Hermeneutic” from Luke 24:44-49, asserting the need for “Christ-centered preaching.”

Audio and video from the discussion with Mohler and Hankins’ sermon are available at sbts.edu/resources.

RuthAnne Irvin contributed to this report.