

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS. Readers of these articles are urged to print copies for themselves and even to duplicate copies for distribution and study. Please include the following permission statement: "Used by permission of the Baptist History and Heritage Society and its website (www.baptisthistory.org), Atlanta, Georgia. Because the articles are produced by free-thinking Baptists, the BH&HS staff and board may or may not agree with the content of each article."

Baptists and Resurgent Calvinism: What Are the True Implications?

Fisher Humphreys

Calvinism

Calvinism is the vision of the Christian faith of John Calvin, a sixteenth-century Protestant reformer. Calvin thought that before creating the universe God decreed that human beings would fall into sin; God then chose which ones God would save (the elect) and which ones would remain lost (the reprobate). God decided the destinies of the elect and the reprobate sovereignly, without reference to God's knowledge of how they would respond to the gospel.

Some Christians think that Calvinism is a matter of degree, but in fact you either are a Calvinist or you aren't. If you think that in eternity God sovereignly predestined some people for salvation and not others, then you are a Calvinist; if you do not think this, you are not a Calvinist.

Some people assume that the difference between Calvinists and other Christians is that Calvinists emphasize God's sovereignty while non-Calvinists emphasize human freedom. This is inaccurate. Non-Calvinists emphasize both divine sovereignty and human freedom; they just do not believe that God decided to save some while passing over others.

Baptists and Calvinism

The first Baptists opposed Calvinism, but soon Calvinism entered Baptist life and flourished. For more than two centuries, most of the best known Baptist leaders were Calvinists. Eventually, however, Calvinism began to fade from Baptist life, and for more than a century now most Baptists have not been Calvinists.

Today Calvinism is experiencing a resurgence among Baptists in the South. An organization called Founders Ministries (see www.founders.org) is dedicated to this endeavor, and some (not all) of the six Southern Baptist seminaries are promoting Calvinism.

No one knows exactly how many Baptists are Calvinists. A recent survey found that 10% of pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention are Calvinists, but that figure may be high. In my home state more than 3,100 churches are affiliated with the Alabama Baptist State Convention, but fewer than 1% of them (29 churches) are listed as Founders Friendly Churches.

Still, Calvinism is making a comeback. What are the implications of that? There is good news and bad news.

The Good News

Calvinism has made massive contributions to Christian theology. Resurgent Calvinism may help restore a sense of the value of theology to sectors of Baptist life where that sense is weak.

One of the great temptations we all face is narcissism. Calvinism is effective at helping people turn their attention away from themselves and toward God.

Calvinists have a long record of taking worship seriously. This could prove helpful to churches which have become so focused on helping people that they need to place more emphasis on worshipping God.

The Bad News

Most significant conflicts in Alabama Baptist churches are about Calvinism; presumably this is true in other states as well. Usually, but not always, this takes the form of a congregation becoming distressed when it discovers that its pastor is a Calvinist. Some congregations have dismissed their Calvinistic pastors; in other congregations numerous members have left because their pastors are Calvinists.

Many Baptists worry that resurgent Calvinism will undercut our commitment to evangelism and missions. They reason that if God has predestined who will and won't be saved, our efforts to evangelize do not really matter; the elect will be saved whether or not we evangelize. This means that many Baptists are being motivated to engage in missions and evangelism by the idea that their efforts can make a difference in who is saved. Obviously Calvinists don't believe this. However, they have other motives for doing evangelism. They evangelize because Christ commanded it, because it brings glory to God, and because they enjoy doing it.

The Calvinistic Baptists I know are committed to evangelism and missions. Still, unless they are able to replace the motive they take away (we can make a difference) with other motives, resurgent Calvinists could undermine Baptists' evangelism and missions.

Conclusion

We Baptists, Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike, are brothers and sisters in Christ. We likely will continue to disagree about whether God predestined some for salvation and passed over others, so we need to treat each other with what the New Testament calls *forbearance*. We who are not Calvinists have a special responsibility to emphasize God's love for the entire world; then we can follow that up with our conviction that since God loves everyone, God would not have predestined some to be lost.

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