



"If he were your son..."

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The Founders Journal

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If He Were Your Son . . .

Thomas Ascol

The following letter was written in response to a Christian father whose unconverted son has fallen into the deadly error of hyper-Calvinism. In a recent letter, the father described his son as hiding behind the view that if God wants him saved, then he will be saved regardless of what he does or does not do. The father asked the editor, "If he were your son, how would you respond?"

Dear Brother:

You have raised a vitally important question. There are several levels on which it could be addressed. The two most critical that bear directly on your relationship with your son are what I would call (for lack of a better term) the principal level and the parental level. In other words, there are general principles which need to be kept in mind (which are always operating) and specific principles that apply directly to the parent-child relationship. I will focus on the former.

You asked me, "If he were your son, how would you respond?" While this question guards me against the tendency to pontificate, it also opens me up to the danger of being falsely idealistic. I don't have a seventeen-year-old son. My oldest child is a girl who is twelve years old. I remember before I had children how easy and simple parenting seemed. It was very easy to criticize others by saying, "Well, I will never . . ." or "When I have children, I will always do thus and so." I have since found that God uses domestic life to humble us by showing us our weaknesses.

So, with those prefatory remarks out of the way, let me attempt an answer.

The first thing I would do would be to go back to basics. In salvation there are 2 absolute truths that seem at times to be contradictory: God is absolutely sovereign-He must do it; Man is absolutely responsible-he is culpable if it is not done. Van Til described these two truths as parallel ropes which extend down to earth from heaven. Though they appear to us never to meet, in heaven they will be seen to be one rope which is wrapped around the pulley of divine wisdom.

Because these two truths are certain, two universal principles must always be believed and applied in the area of evangelism:

- 1) We cannot do what must be done.
- 2) We must do what can be done.

The first protects us from false guilt and false despair over lost men while driving us to our knees in prayer. The second protects us from fatalistic contentment over the lost condition of men while driving us to proclaim the gospel with passion to those who are unconverted.

It is the second principle on which I would concentrate if my son had fallen into a convenient, fatalistic mind game. What can a parent do? We can certainly teach, warn, plead, exemplify, and pray.

I would do my best to explode his fatalism with the heavy artillery of Scripture, and that in two ways. First, I would

attack his attitude and thinking directly. The gracious invitations in the Word along with the commands and exhortations of God provide ample ammunition for this frontal assault.

"Come to Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt. 11:28-29). These words suggest many arguments to use against a fatalistic mindset: "Are you burdened for your sins? Are you inwardly restless? Are you concerned about your unconverted state? If so, then heed Jesus' invitation. Come to Him. Listen to Him in His Word. Follow Him. Are you even trying to do this? Is it your desire and intention to learn from Jesus in humility and faith? Then order your life accordingly. Take advantage of every opportunity to seek the Lord and hear His word. Make it the great priority of your life."

"Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17). I would say, "Son, do you desire salvation in Christ? If so then the Word of God instructs you to come. It does not say to come if you are sure that you are elect, or after you have figured out all of the knotty theological problems extending from God's sovereignty. It simply says that if you desire, if you are spiritually thirsty, 'Come!'"

Not only are sinners invited to come to Christ, God actually commands them to come. The very first commandment obligates everyone to be reconciled to God. "You shall have no other gods before Me." This is the Creator's requirement of all of His image-bearing creatures. How is this commandment obeyed? There is only one way: by trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation. Every moment that a person remains in unbelief he is living in clear disobedience to God's will and will therefore be held accountable for his refusal to believe.

"Now God commands all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). Regardless of what one believes and understands (or misunderstands) about God's sovereignty, this verse unequivocally shows that everyone is under divine obligation to repent of sin. Those who hear and yet refuse to heed God's call to repent are held accountable for their impenitence.

There are countless other texts in the Scripture which show the unmitigated obligation which sinners have to repent and believe the gospel. All of these verses must be given their proper place in your son's thinking. It seems that he has ignored or perhaps deflated them of their significance.

Of course, this is a favorite and, unfortunately, effective strategy of Satan. He is skillful at twisting God's words just enough that they still sound plausible though their meaning is distorted. We see this in his approach to Eve in the garden. He did not start out by directly contradicting what God had said. Rather, he misrepresented God's words. The way Satan told it, God was holding back something wonderful and life-giving from Adam and Eve.

This is the same strategy which was employed against our Lord in the wilderness. Satan used Scriptural arguments with Jesus-but his damning selectivity was exposed by the careful, biblical responses of our Lord.

Is this not what has happened to your son? He has taken hold of only half of the truth. Your son has fallen prey to the enemy's subtlety. I have seen this tactic used more frequently with unbelievers from the other direction. Usually, in this day and age, the mistake is found on the opposite side. Men are convinced that salvation is all up to them. Because they are responsible to repent and believe, they falsely reason that repentance and faith are in their power to exercise at will. So, "Not now," "Tomorrow," and "Later" are frequently on their lips when the subject is salvation.

It does not matter whether one falls into the right-hand ditch or the left-hand ditch-both are disastrous because both present part of the truth as if it were all the truth. As has been well noted, when a half truth is substituted for a whole

truth it becomes a whole lie.

Along with direct application of biblical invitations and commands, I would try to warn my son of the folly of clinging to his erroneous ideas. Though there are many mistakes in his thinking, two subjects which he obviously misunderstands are at the very heart of all the others: God and himself. As Calvin says in the opening words of the *Institutes*, "True and substantial wisdom principally consists of two parts, the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of ourselves." These two subjects are foundational to the biblical revelation of salvation.

Your son needs an accurate understanding of himself. He does not fully appreciate his spiritual condition if he is content to sit still. If a man were in a house that is on fire and the only way out is a door which has a lock on the outside, what would he do? It is not hard to imagine that he would pound on that door hoping that someone would hear him and save him. The fact that the lock is on the outside would not make him inactive. It should make him desperate, but if he were tempted to do nothing because of his inability to unlock the door, the heat of the fire would certainly stir him to do whatever he could to get help from outside.

Those who have imbibed in fatalism need to see the danger of their situation. The unbeliever who is not desperate has not yet seen his true condition before God. Some warn that painting the state of the unconverted too graphically will injure unbelievers and make them too afraid to trust God. Such concern, however, is wrongheaded and does not take seriously the biblical descriptions of the plight of those outside of Christ. Consider how the great revival leader, Jonathan Edwards, in his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," warned the unconverted:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince: and yet, it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you were suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.

Does this misrepresent God as some kind of cosmic ogre who loves to see sinners squirm under the threat of divine wrath? Not at all! On the contrary this description simply takes seriously the sinfulness of sin before God. Unbelievers, including our children, must be told the truth about their condition before God. Why? So that they may be awakened to their desperate need of Jesus Christ.

Accurate self-understanding does not lead a sinner to passivity. If he is willing to sit back and wait to be "zapped" by divine grace, then he obviously does not yet get it. He has not seen how desperate his condition is. Bunyan captures this point very well in Hopeful's testimony in *Pilgrim's Progress*. After he was converted Hopeful understood that "by awakenings for Sin [i.e. coming to see the utter sinfulness and desperation of his condition as a sinner], God at first begins the Conversion of a Sinner."

For Hopeful, this awakening came gradually until he finally realized that he was completely guilty before God for

his sins. His great problem became how to escape the damnation that his sins deserved. When instructed to go to Christ, Hopeful at first thought that it was presumptuous and he feared that God was not willing to save him. But his friend Faithful continued to plead with him to go to Christ. Though he was not immediately converted, Hopeful did not stop seeking Christ.

Carefully consider Hopeful's testimony-especially as he explains *why* he did not give up seeking the Lord:

Christian And did you do as you were bidden?

Hope. Yes; over and over, and over.

Christian. And did the Father reveal his Son to you?

Hope. Not at the first, nor second, nor third, nor fourth, nor fifth; no, nor at the sixth time neither.

Christian. What did you do then?

Hope. What! why I could not tell what to do.

Christian. Had you not thoughts of leaving off Praying?

Hope. Yes; an hundred times twice told.

Christian. And what was the reason you did not?

Hope. I believed that that was true, which had been told me, *to wit*, That without the Righteousness of this Christ, all the World could not save me; and therefore thought I with myself, if I leave off, I die, and I can but die at the Throne of Grace. And withal this came into my mind, *If it tarry, wait for it, because it will surely come, and will not tarry.* I continued Praying, until the Father shewed me his Son.

Hopeful's sense of desperation did not make him idle! It made him willing to die at the foot of God's throne, begging for mercy and grace. Of course, he did not die there-and no one ever has or ever will. But, he came to see that his need was so great, his condition so desperate, that he was willing to die seeking salvation. This what the Lord meant when He said, "And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13).

The other error that I would focus on is my son's misunderstanding of God. The point which is too often missed in Edwards' sermon (and the point which must be driven home to your son) is that God is incredibly gracious and patient to withhold His judgment from His enemies who so justly deserve immediate condemnation. "Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4). The unconverted must come to see that the fact they are still alive is a testimony to God's patience and grace.

There is a great need for careful balance here if the biblical revelation of God's character is to be faithfully upheld. Edwards does this marvelously well in his famous sermon, though, as I have already mentioned, many modern readers miss it. Edwards is telling the truth when he says to unbelievers,

The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.

God is "angry with the wicked everyday" and He does prepare the sword and arrows of His wrath for them (Psalm 7:11-13). His wrath does presently abide on all those who live in unbelief (John 3:36). He is too holy to look on evil and wickedness (Hab. 1:13). God's holiness, wrath, justice and judgment must never be eclipsed in our teaching or thinking about God. But neither must these dimensions of His character be allowed to overshadow His mercy, grace,

goodness, and gentleness.

After all, God is withholding the execution of His wrath with every new breath which he puts into his enemies' nostrils. This is the point that, in one sense, is the theme of Edwards' sermon: the emphasis is not so much on God's holy anger as it is on His gracious hand! What an amazingly gracious God He is not to immediately destroy His enemies and cast them into hell! Even more amazing, is the awesome fact that this God, our God, has actually loved sinners and given His Son for our redemption. I would talk much to my son about the mercy and grace that are revealed in Jesus Christ. How can anyone look at the cross and doubt the love and goodness of God? I would encourage my son to believe the truth-the whole truth-about God. God does not play games with us. Though He is holy, He is not harsh. He does not hold the apple of salvation in front of us only to snatch it away when we reach for it.

Well, my letter has run much longer than I anticipated, and I have not even addressed the "parental level." With your permission, I will leave that for another time.

I do not want to close, however, without adding one brief comment on prayer. In my own pleadings with God for my children I derive much comfort and motivation from recognizing that He uses means in the accomplishment of His gracious purposes. "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:17). If the Lord intends to save someone He is going to get His word to them. In His infinite wisdom He has given my children to parents are committed to teaching them His Word. He could have given them to other parents, or He could have left their parents unconverted. But He chose to give them to us, and by His grace, Donna and I are teaching them the gospel.

This providential fact provides no grounds for presumption (i.e. "because they are my children they will inevitably be saved"), but it does provide a solid foundation for hope. Why would He give them to parents who love their souls and who pray for them and try to teach them if He does not intend to save them? I am not suggesting that that question has no answer, but I am saying that the fact that God uses means and has chosen to bring those means to my children encourages me greatly to pray and work for their salvation.

One of my favorite stories from church history has to do with Augustine and his mother, Monica. As she watched her son go unabashedly into a life of sin, she became increasingly consumed with his conversion. When Augustine became ensnared by a deadly philosophical heresy, Monica nearly wore out her pastor, Ambrose, with her continual petitions to him to talk to her son. Finally, Ambrose grew weary of seeing her and said, "Leave me and go in peace. It cannot be that the son of such tears should be lost."

Looking back on that period of his mother's travail for his soul, Augustine wrote to God in his *Confessions*,

But *you sent down your help from above* and rescued my soul from the depth of this darkness because my mother, your faithful servant, wept to you for me, shedding more tears for my spiritual death than other mothers shed for the bodily death of a son. For in her faith and in the spirit which she had from you she looked on me as dead. You heard her and did not despise the tears which streamed down and watered the earth in every place where she bowed her head in prayer.

I am sure that you agree that we must never cease praying for our children. As long as there is breath, there is hope.

May the Lord grant that your burden for your son's salvation should never end until you see Christ being formed in him. Be assured that you both are in my prayers.

In Christ,
Tom



An Open Letter About *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism*

Many subscribers look to the *Founders Journal* for guidance and encouragement--this gives the editors a serious responsibility as leaders.

One of the marks of good leadership is to anticipate problems and address them before they hit the fan, that is, before they cause serious problems. It is much better to head them off before they harm serious Christians.

This brings me to the purpose of this letter. It is a historical fact that when true evangelical Calvinism comes alive and active, Hyper-Calvinism will soon raise its ugly head. In the last fifteen years we have witnessed the fact that God has been pleased to raise up many preachers and Christians who are returning to our historical, biblical roots, that is, to the doctrinal roots of the founders of our first seminary. These doctrines are expressed in the Abstract of Principles found in the Fundamental Law of the seminary written into its charter April 30, 1858: "Every Professor of the Institution shall be a member of a regular Baptist Church; and all persons accepting Professorships in this Seminary, shall be considered by such acceptance, as engaging to teach in accordance with, and not contrary to, the Abstract of Principles hereinafter laid down." (Mueller: History of Southern Seminary; Broadman Press, p. 238).

A more comprehensive expression can be found in Dr. James P. Boyce's *Systematic Theology*. This doctrinal position can also be found in the writings of Dr. John L. Dagg, the first writing Southern Baptist Theologian. I want to point out that if these founding fathers had true biblical doctrine then it is still true because God has not changed and the Bible has not changed. Truth does not change! There is no question that our founding fathers were, for the most part, committed evangelical Calvinists.

If what I have stated is a correct observation then a logical question is, "What can be done to head off and stifle the monster of Hyper-Calvinism?" I think I have a suggestion that will, at least, be a large step toward heading off our enemy-Hyper-Calvinism. By now, I hope you are asking WHAT IS THIS SUGGESTION?

In 1995 I read a manuscript which has since been published as a little paperback. I have never seen a better tool for our task of fighting Hyper-Calvinism. The author of the book, Iain H. Murray, is an authority on Charles Haddon Spurgeon. The title of the book announces its subject: *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism*. (see the [review](#) in [FJ 23](#)).

In Chapter 5 of this little paperback, Spurgeon's four-fold appeal to Scripture against Hyper-Calvinism is discussed. The four areas considered are:

- (1) Hyper-Calvinism and Gospel Invitations
- (2) Hyper-Calvinism and the Warrant of Faith
- (3) Hyper-Calvinism and Human Responsibility.

The Heart of the dispute between evangelical Calvinism and Hyper-Calvinism concerns the place of man's responsibility or his free agency (which is an equivalent term) and free will. Free will and Free agency should not be confused. Since the fall, men have *not* lost their responsibility, but they have lost the ability, the will, to obey God, to any spiritual good.

- (4) Hyper-Calvinism and the Love of God.

Chapter 11 contains Spurgeon's sermon on a critical text: 1 Timothy 2:3,4 ("God our Savior, who, will have all men

to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth"). Here are just a few paragraphs from that sermon:

May God the Holy Ghost guide our meditations to the best practical result this evening, that sinners may be saved and saints stirred up to diligence.

I do not intend to treat my text controversially. It is like the stone which makes the corner of a building, and it looks towards a different side of the gospel from that which is mostly before us. Two sides of the building of truth meet here. In many a village there is a corner where the idle and the quarrelsome gather together; and theology has such corners. It would be very easy indeed to set ourselves in battle array, and during the next half-hour to carry on a very fierce attack against those who differ from us in opinion upon points which could be raised from this text. I do not see that any good would come of it, and, as we have very little time to spare, and life is short, we had better spend it upon something that may better tend to our edification. May the good Spirit preserve us from a contentious spirit, and help us really to profit by his word.

It is quite certain that when we read that God will have all men to be saved it does not mean that he wills it with the force of a decree or a divine purpose, for, if he did, then all men would be saved. He willed to make the world, and the world was made: he does not so will the salvation of all men, for we know that all men will not be saved. Terrible as the truth is, yet is it certain from holy writ that there are men who, in consequence of their sin and their rejection of the Savior, will go away into everlasting punishment, where shall be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. There will at the last be goats upon the left hand as well as sheep on the right, tares to be burned as well as wheat to be garnered, chaff to be blown away as well as corn to be preserved. There will be a dreadful hell as well as a glorious heaven, and there is no decree to the contrary.

What then? Shall we try to put another meaning into the text than that which it fairly bears? I trow not. You must, most of you, be acquainted with the general method in which our older Calvinistic friends deal with this text. 'All men,' they say, '-that is, some men': as if the Holy Ghost could not have said 'some men' if he had meant some men. 'All men,' say they; 'that is, some of all sorts of men'; as if the Lord could not have said 'All sorts of men' if he had meant that. The Holy Ghost by the apostle has written 'all men,' and unquestionably he means all men. I know how to get rid of the force of the 'alls' according to that critical method which some time ago was very current, but I do not see how it can be applied here with due regard to the truth. I was reading just now the exposition of a very able doctor who explains the text so as to explain it away; he applies grammatical gunpowder to it, and explodes it by way of expounding it. I thought when I read his exposition that it would have been a very capital comment upon the text if it had read, 'Who will not have all men to be saved, nor come to a knowledge of the truth.' Had such been the inspired language every remark of the learned doctor would have been exactly in keeping, but as it happens to say, 'Who will have all men to be saved,' his observation are more than a little out of place. My love of consistency with my own doctrinal views is not great enough to allow me knowingly to alter a single text of Scripture. I have great respect for orthodoxy, but my reverence for inspiration is far greater. I would sooner a hundred times over appear to be inconsistent with myself than be inconsistent with the word of God. I never thought it to be any very great crime to seem to be inconsistent with myself, for who am I that I should everlastingly be consistent? But I do think it a great crime to be so inconsistent with the word of God that I should want to lop away a bough or even a twig from so much as a single tree of the forest of Scripture. God forbid that I should cut or shape, even in the least degree, any divine expression. So runs the text, and so we must read it, 'God our Savior; who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.'

Does not the text mean that it is the wish of God that men should be saved? The word `wish' gives as much force to the original as it really requires, and the passage should run thus- `whose wish it is that all men should be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.' As it is my wish that it should be so, as it is your wish that it might be so, so it is God's wish that all men should be saved; for, assuredly, he is not less benevolent than we are. Then comes the question, `But if he wishes it to be so, why does he not make it so?' Beloved friend, have you never heard that a fool may ask a question which a wise man cannot answer, and, if that be so, I am sure a wise person, like yourself, can ask me a great many questions which, fool as I am, I am yet not foolish enough to try to answer. Your question is only one form of the great debate of all the ages,- `If God be infinitely good and powerful, why does not his power carry out to the full all his beneficence?' It is God's wish that the oppressed should go free, yet there are many oppressed who are not free. It is God's wish that the sick should not suffer. Do you doubt it? Is it not your own wish? And yet the Lord does not work a miracle to heal every sick person. It is God's wish that his creatures should be happy. Do you deny that? He does not interpose by any miraculous agency to make us all happy, and yet it would be wicked to suppose that he does not wish the happiness of all the creatures that he has made. He has an infinite benevolence which, nevertheless, is not in all points worked out by his infinite omnipotence; and if anybody asked me why it is not, I cannot tell. I have never set up to be an explainer of all difficulties, and I have no desire to do so. . . . I cannot tell you why God permits moral evil, neither can the ablest philosopher on earth, nor the highest angel in heaven.

An Appeal For Your Help

The retail price of this book is \$5.95. The postage for first-class mail is nearly \$2.00. The editors of the *Founders Journal* hope to mail 1500 copies free to the ministers and church leaders during the next 12 months. The publisher, Banner of Truth, has been very gracious to us and we do not have to pay \$5.95 per copy. Their generosity allows us to offer a free copy of this book to every new subscriber to the *Founders Journal*. Nevertheless, the task of getting this book into the hands of 1500 people will be expensive.

It is not our policy to appeal for money. In fourteen years we have appealed to our Founders family and friends only once-for the Mission 150 effort. Under God, and with your generous help, we were able to distribute about 60,000 copies of the double issue of the journal to ministers all over the world. The printing and postage cost was approximately \$65,000 and every cent came in voluntarily with absolutely no pressure. The committee has no paid personnel and everything was done with honest Christian labor, tears and sweat all out of love for God's truth.

The Psalmist said, "The Lord gave the Word; Great was the company of those who proclaimed it." Psalm 66:11 (NKJV). We are inviting you to become a proclaimer with the Founders family in this worthy project. If you would like to contribute to the cause of getting this book into the hands of ministers and church leaders, simply send your tax deductible gift noted for that purpose to:

Spurgeon Project
The Founders Journal
P.O. Box 150931
Cape Coral, FL 33915

Sincerely yours in Christ's service according to my light and power,
Ernest C. Reisinger



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The Perfect Balance of God's Truth

Geoff Thomas

A friend recently visited a church where in the past five years a renewing work of God has taken place. He wrote describing his weekend with the members: "One remarkable thing was that whenever I passed by a group of men they would be talking about the things of God. I finally asked what was the secret of this blessing they had known. I had an answer myself, but I wanted to see what they would say. They gave the correct reply, that it was a sovereign work of God. They said that it had not always been this way, and they were aware that God was at work in their midst. It was very encouraging. It wasn't revival, but when I envision revival, that's one of the things that comes to my mind. It was encouraging to see it actually taking place somewhere and it gave me fresh hope for the possibility of revival."

In every awakening there is a new fascination with the Bible: "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another" (Malachi 3:16). Of course in awakenings, too, men get sidetracked and obsessed by the fine points of theology or by those doctrines which divide true Christians. Yet one mark of God blessing a congregation is a desire to talk together about the diverse and even apparently contradictory ways of God. We love to attend those fellowships where people discuss the teaching of the Bible as readily as others talk of their interests and jobs. Understanding the Word is to be among our greatest joys.

One mark of maturity is an experiential grasp of those truths which seem to be in conflict with one another, but in fact are like the arms of a Father gripping his children. Both are to be believed as each stands on the basis of its own independent biblical witness. There are a wide range of such truths in Scripture, of which five examples now follow.

1. Inability does not rule out responsibility

The Scripture asserts unmistakably man's total inability to transform his character by his own unassisted wit and energy, so making himself Christlike. This is beyond his capacity. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil" (Jeremiah 13:23). "No man can come unto me except the Father who sent me draw him," says the Lord Christ (John 6:44). The act of true and simple faith in the Lord is impossible apart from the drawing and gracious gift of the Father. Jesus again tells us that except a man be born again he cannot see or enter into the kingdom of God (John 3:3,5).

Yet, there are commands with which God confronts every single person. For example, "You must be born again" (John 3:7); "God commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30); and "Love the Lord your God with all your heart." Are they sincere commands? Absolutely. All creatures are responsible to their Creator. Do not such commands presuppose a modicum of ability? No. Not since the fall of our father Adam. God deals with people according to the standards of responsibility and obligation, not according to the measure of ability. John Murray says, "If obligation presupposes ability then we shall have to go the whole way and predicate the total ability of man." Why are the commands given? They are a revelation of the will of almighty God, and they also make men realize their helplessness. One result of the inability of man being preached is that people are forced to stop trusting in themselves. This shuts them up to rely upon God's grace. It is not the conviction of helplessness that keeps men away from Christ; it is the opposite: "I cannot come to him, but I must come to him. What fearful inability! What high responsibility! Who shall deliver me from this dilemma? I thank God for Jesus Christ the enabling Saviour."

2. Certainty does not rule out necessity

All that God has determined to do will most certainly be achieved: "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please" (Isaiah 46:10). The plan of God is unchangeable, because God is faithful and true (Job 23:13-14). It is unconditional, that is, its execution does not depend on any action of man but even renders such action certain (Acts 2:23; Ephesians 2:8). Moreover, it is all-inclusive, embracing the good and the wicked actions of men (Ephesians 2:10; Acts 2:23), contingent events (Genesis 50:20), the duration of a man's life (Job 14:5) and the place where a man will live (Acts 17:26). It ensures the certain salvation of a vast number of favoured sinners.

Yet the certainty of God's secret will being accomplished does not rule out the necessity of men doing all that God has commanded in the Bible. When Paul was told that the Lord had many people in Corinth he did not sit on a chair on his veranda waiting for Corinthians to drop decision cards in his lap. For eighteen months he taught the Word of God to all in Corinth who would hear him (Acts 18:11). He did it beseeching them to believe, stretching forth his hands to them, entreating them to repent. He wept for them. He prayed for them all, and he asked others to pray. He visited them privately, debated with his opponents publicly, and apologized if he offended them by harsh words. He sought to live a Christlike life before them so that in nothing would his message be maligned through sin. He knew God's chosen people in Corinth would most certainly confess Christ, but that knowledge in no way ruled out the necessity of his living a God-fearing and fervently evangelistic life.

3. Limited purpose does not rule out indiscriminate preaching

There are a people whom God the Father has given to God the Son (John 17:2 etc.). They have such titles as "the church," "the people of God," "the children of God" or Jesus' "sheep." Often in the New Testament we are told that Christ's death was focused upon accomplishing their salvation: "He shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21); "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25); "Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one" (John 11:51-52); "You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:26-28). The Lord Christ has fulfilled God's purpose in saving all those who are his people.

Yet to every single person in the world without exception the Christian may sincerely say, "I have good news for you. I have Christ crucified for you to believe upon. I have this Saviour who is prophet, priest and king for you to receive, and serve." The Christian must then invite his hearer(s) to believe his message, and demand that he do so, and even beseech him in the name of Christ that he does not go on in unbelief. The Christian does that to every single person without distinction or discrimination. The Christian quotes to all men the words of God, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God and there is none else" (Isaiah 45:22); and again, "As I live saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11). The Saviour is presented to lost men as one who has accomplished a full and perfect redemption, who would sincerely save them from their sin, and who takes no pleasure in their death.

4. Preservation does not rule out perseverance

Every true Christian experiences the continuous operation of the Holy Spirit by which the work of divine grace begun in him is continued and brought to completion. This doctrine is clearly taught in Scripture (John 10:28-29; Romans 11:29; Philippians 1:6; 2 Thessalonians 3:3; 2 Timothy 1:12; 4:18). Every believer is preserved by the

power of God through faith unto salvation (1 Peter 1:5).

Yet the Bible teaches that every Christian must persevere on his individual pilgrimage. That guards against every notion or suggestion to the effect that a believer is secure, that is to say, secure as to his eternal salvation, quite irrespective of the extent to which he may fall into sin and backslide from faith and holiness. While a Christian may and does sin he cannot abandon himself to sin; he cannot come under the dominion of sin; he cannot be guilty of certain kinds of unfaithfulness (e.g. the sin which is unto death). So, though the believer is preserved he is not secure utterly irrespective of his subsequent life of sin and unfaithfulness. He will persevere in believing in God. It is not that he will be saved irrespective of his perseverance but he will keep plodding to the end. His preservation is inseparable from his perseverance.

5. Love does not rule out law

Christian love is the greatest of all. It is the "distinguishing mark of the Christian life" (John Blanchard), "the badge of Christ's disciples" (Matthew Henry), "the leading affection of the soul" (Matthew Henry), "the queen of all the Christian graces" (Arthur Pink), "the silver thread that runs through all your conduct" (J. C. Ryle). Without love a church is nothing at all (1 Corinthians 13:2). The new commandment Christ gives his people is to love one another as he has loved us. By this fervent pure affection the world will know that we are God's people Love is the most godlike grace.

Yet Paul says, "The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good" (Romans 7:12). Of course it must be; it comes from God; it displays his very nature. Paul cries, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Romans 7:22). He loves the law because it shows the perfections of the Holy One. The Christian is freed from the law's condemnation and curse through the saving work of Christ. No longer is the law to him a dread voice accusing and judging. Christ has quenched Mount Sinai's flame; the believer is freed from sin and from the law. But now he becomes the bondsman of Jesus Christ his great liberator, and so fulfills "the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). "If you love me, keep my commandments," says the Saviour (John 14:15). Love is the Christian's inward motive; but the law of Christ is his directive. As someone has put it, "Law is love's eyes. Without law love is blind."

These twin themes, the outworking of the revelation of God's sovereignty, both taught so clearly in Scripture, are the stuff of holy conversation and profitable meditation.



Freedom Through Prohibition:

Sabbath Observance for Lovers of Liberty

Mark Devine

"Give me Liberty or give me death." The plea attributed to Patrick Henry resonates deeply with American Christians in ways far removed from revulsion toward the British Sugar Act of 1775. That liberty which Colonial patriots demanded for their nation and congregations sought for their religious communities, individual believers sometimes covet for themselves in virtually every area of their personal existence.

For this reason, Henry's battle cry may find more welcoming ears among late twentieth century believers than another dictum more ancient but seemingly less freedom friendly -- "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8, NIV). However, today's aversion toward restrictive forms of Sabbath keeping may risk jeopardizing exactly what it sought to preserve -- freedom.

Growing up in the South, the words of the fourth commandment often fell upon my ears. Their meaning, and especially their immediate relevance for my weekend activities, was made clear to me at Church by the preacher and the Sunday School teacher; at home by parents, aunts and uncles; along the highways and among the hedges by fellow Christians with a predilection for instructing others. The Sabbath was equivalent to Sunday, the Lord's Day. It meant compulsory attendance in the House of God and community "blue" laws restricting all nonvital business activity. "If you're too sick to worship God," my father typically replied to requests for a reprieve from Sunday services, "you're too sick for anything today except the bed!" On the surface, it is fairly clear why many have viewed the Sabbath as "an austere day for those who observe it, a day lacking joy and spirit."[\[1\]](#)

Past enthusiasm for "keeping the Sabbath holy" seems to have at least waned significantly, and has disappeared altogether from some pulpits as a matter of significant concern. One explanation for this reversal probably involves that special element of American cultural identity which Sabbath or Lord's Day observance would seem to challenge and even threaten, namely, freedom, or more precisely, the love of personal liberty.

Amid such pervasive zeal for individual autonomy and prerogatives, restrictive forms of Sabbath keeping may be viewed as unenlightened legalism. When keeping the Sabbath seems to emphasize prohibitions, it tends to appear as a day of negation, a day for intolerant and provincial "Thou shalt nots." A case in point is the gentlemen from Maine who was "rebuked and fined for 'unseemly walking' on the Lord's Day" and later protested that he "ran to save a man from drowning."[\[2\]](#) Did not Jesus himself wage a personal campaign against exactly such inhumane application of the fourth commandment (Mark 2:27)?

We Americans typically resist restrictions on personal liberty, partly in rebellion against a false caricature of our Puritan heritage, but mostly on principle. Many of us, whether Christian believers or not, cling to personal liberty as though it were an unassailable, inviolable ideal come down from heaven. Jesus's freedom statements and the apostle Paul's classic Galatian defense of Christian liberty (Galatians 5:1) are frequently cited to support a tenacious insistence upon individual freedom.

Free Creatures of the Liberating Creator

Ironically, the goal of both the Jewish Sabbath and the Christian Lord's Day was never the enslavement of its adherents, but their liberation. Even a brief exploration of the origins and development of the Jewish Sabbath reveals that the fourth commandment was intended to secure and nurture true human freedom.

At first, the Sabbath's liberating aim seems hidden. The verbal form of the word "Sabbath" (which renders the Hebrew "shabbat") means "to cease, to desist, or to rest." Indeed, the Jewish Sabbath, and for that matter, the Christian Lord's Day has appropriately been acknowledged as "the day of rest and abstention from work."[\[3\]](#)

However, the clue to the liberating purpose of Sabbath prohibitions lies in the two biblical, theological justifications for its observance. The Sabbath law is firmly established as the fourth of the ten commandments. In Exodus 20:8f., the rationale for Sabbath observance relates to God's creative activity, while in Deuteronomy 5:12f., it is grounded in God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage.[\[4\]](#)

In the Exodus passage, the theological rationale undergirding Sabbath observance derives from God's cessation of creative activity. Since the Creator rested from his own work on the first Sabbath, so ought humankind to desist from ordinary human labor one day out of seven. Thus, the first reason to observe the Sabbath is "to emulate God," and by so doing, acknowledge his divine claim upon the universe and ourselves.[\[5\]](#) When, as God's creatures, we cease ordinary work and activity one day out of seven, we testify that the world is not ours and indeed, we ourselves belong to the Creator who is Lord of the universe.[\[6\]](#)

In the Deuteronomy passage, Sabbath observance called for intentional remembrance of God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian slavery. If, on the one hand, the duty of Sabbath keeping highlighted human subjection to God, it also emphasized divine emancipation from human rulers. Accordingly, "slaves, servants and even animals all are to be free of servitude to human masters on the seventh day."[\[7\]](#) The Sabbath was to serve as a weekly recurring divine protest against all slavery and oppression. For this reason, tyrants of all times have forbidden the Jews from celebrating the Sabbath.[\[8\]](#)

Israel's recognition and embrace of the Sabbath's liberating impulse has taken the forms of community rest, political protest and social concern. During the period of the monarchy, the Sabbath was a "popular, joyous holy day, marked by cessation of business and celebrated publicly and by individuals, in the sanctuary and outside it."[\[9\]](#) Not only before, but during the Babylonian Exile, the poor were to be relieved on the Sabbath of carrying any burden for their masters (Jeremiah 17:19f.).[\[10\]](#) Sabbath observance became an important confessional act of covenant identity for captive Israel in Babylon where different time systems prevailed.[\[11\]](#) In actual practice, Israel acknowledged the Sabbath's importance for the securing of human freedom for God's chosen people.

Freedom for God

Yet, the ultimate purpose of Sabbath keeping was never to free humanity *from* anything, whether it be work, slavery, or various political constraints. These negative freedoms *from* oppressors are meant to remove barriers to another freedom *for* a specific Someone. The goal of the Sabbath is always to liberate human beings *for* the two-dimensional activity for which they were created, namely, the glorification and enjoyment of God, their Creator.[\[12\]](#) An attempt to relate the creation (Exodus 20) and redemption (Deuteronomy 5) rationales for Sabbath keeping helps illuminate both its positive, God-centered goal and the necessity of its prohibitive, restrictive elements.

God's saving activity demonstrated his intolerance for the enslavement of his people, whether by Israelite masters or foreign oppressors. However, the call for *Sabbath* remembrance of such saving activity indicates the reason for this divine intolerance. Sabbath remembrance points humanity back to its creation, and thus to its essential nature as dependent, precious possessions of a loving and providing Creator. Thus, the Sabbath does not intend to liberate believers in an abstract sense, but specifically to free us for God, in relation to whom alone we are at liberty to be our true selves.

Ironically, the Deuteronomic justification for Sabbath keeping (the remembrance of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt) does not fully comprehend the liberating aim of the fourth commandment. Only as it points to the Sabbath's grounding in creation as an assertion of the divine claim upon his people does the positive implication of Sabbath observance burst forth. God frees his people for Himself, and by so doing, liberates them from all oppressors, including that of an autonomous, unbridled personal liberty.

Six Days for the Sake of One

Once the Sabbath's relationship to humanity's true, created nature is seen in connection with its call for humanity's exclusive devotion to the Creator, one prevalent misunderstanding of the Sabbath's intended purpose becomes visible. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the seventh day seems not to have been given primarily for the sake of the remaining six. Rather, the six days were given for the sake of the seventh and must serve the seventh.

Karl Barth has aptly reminded us that *God*, not man, had been working on the first six days of creation. "And on the seventh day God finished *his* work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all *his* work" (Genesis 2:1-3). Indeed, "God's seventh day was man's first."[\[13\]](#) Primarily, this was the day of the Lord and therefore a time for giving witness to God's completion of His work, sharing in His Sabbath freedom, Sabbath festivity, and Sabbath joy, the special time to be with God. So, the time of humanity *begins* with "a day of rest and not a day of work; with freedom and not with obligation; with a holiday, and not with a task; with joy and not with labor and toil; under the Gospel and not under the Law."[\[14\]](#)

The Sabbath, then, as a time for the glorification and enjoyment of God frees humanity to fulfill the chief purpose of its creation, not to "rest up" for the "real" work to come in the six days ahead. On the contrary, the six remaining days provide space for the thankful labor inspired and initiated by acknowledgment of God's work on the seventh day. Man's six days of toil have both their origin and goal in the God-centered, creative, and redemptive Sabbaths which mark their beginning and end.

When the Sabbath is recognized as humanity's first day, the Christian adoption of Sunday as "the Lord's Day" or as the Christian Sabbath, appears as less of an innovation than is sometimes assumed. Of course the first reason for Christian observance of the first day of the week as its special time of worship and celebration is the Sunday resurrection of the crucified Jesus from the dead. What could be more appropriate since one central dimension of Jewish Sabbath observance is the deliberate anticipation of the coming of the promised Messiah. "Every Sabbath is a messianic celebration. For twenty-four hours a foretaste of the Messianic kingdom is savored by the Jew in peace and security and spiritual concentration."[\[15\]](#) The Rabbis agreed--"If Israel keeps one sabbath as it should be kept, the Messiah will come."[\[16\]](#) From the standpoint of the Christian confession of Jesus as Messiah, Sabbath observance on the first day of the week celebrates the fulfillment of Jewish messianic hopes. From the perspective of humanity's created nature as revealed in the first Sabbath, it re-establishes the original sequence of humanity's week, namely, beginning with a Sabbath. From both angles Sabbath keeping clearly seeks to free God's creatures to celebrate and give thanks for the work of God, whether in creation or redemption.

Sabbath: An Easy Yoke

Ardent, lifelong Sabbath keepers testify to its liberating rewards. The dismal caricature of the Sabbath as viewed from outside its observance contrasts sharply with the delight and peace confessed from within. One Midrash^[17] has God speaking thus: "A precious jewel have I in my possession, which I wish to give to Israel, and Sabbath is its name."^[18] Nathan Barak dedicated his history of the Sabbath to his parents, "in whose home the Sabbath was a day of peaceful rest, joy and holiness."^[19] Donin found the joys of Sabbath observance almost inexpressible: ". . . to describe the feeling that overcomes one on the Sabbath is like trying to describe a beautiful sunset to a blind man."^[20]

Far from the binding oppression of a legalistic duty, the Sabbath has freed those who have taken its yoke upon them (Matthew 11:28-30). The liberation enjoyed was, specifically, the freedom to worship, thank, listen to, and, in short, commune with God. We creatures require a Sabbath since communion with our Creator is the unique activity for which we were designed.

Space for Sabbath Keeping

So, Christian Sabbath observance is meant to liberate believers for the glorification and enjoyment of God. When these two elements are present, genuine communion with God is possible. Few of us would deny the need for such freedom and communion. What many do resist though, are the restrictive aspects of Sabbath observance. The question is whether the freedom promised to Sabbath observers is achievable without the aid of reasonable "Thou shalt nots."

Enemies of all prohibitive forms of Sabbath keeping abound. Professed Christians who neglect congregational worship on Sunday frequently claim the need for "rest" in order to prepare themselves for the labor of the coming week. Household chores and recreational activities beckon those fortunate enough to be free of secular employment on the Lord's Day. For many, Sunday is a time to "catch up" on the many things left undone after a busy week, or to indulge oneself in whatever pleasure the workweek schedule prevents.

Accordingly, Sabbath prohibitions against many seemingly innocuous activities may strike us as unnecessarily severe and even unhealthy. For certain strict Jews, Sabbath observance means no cooking, washing clothes, gardening, shaving, carrying, pushing or moving an object more than six feet; no riding an animal, boating, playing a musical instrument, radio, television, or operating an automobile.^[21] While these constraints might not be advisable or even workable within our own communities, such detailed strictures do take seriously important dimensions of human sinfulness with which all genuine Sabbath keepers must cope. I am speaking of self-enslavement to mundane tasks or pleasures at a time when our Creator would command our special wholehearted attention.

Agreement among Christians even of very close spiritual kinship on the exact manner of biblical Sabbath keeping is not that easy to find. While many Puritans prohibited "play and recreation" on the Lord's Day, their spiritual forefather, John Calvin, disagreed. Calvin did not find any Christian justification for proscribing work and play outside of regular worship service time on Sunday. However, Calvin, as well as the Puritans, saw the Christian Sabbath as "a rest from all activities *of our own contriving* so that, having God work in us (Hebrews 13:21), we may repose in him (Hebrews 4:9) . . ."^[22] The Sabbath is a time in which "we must be wholly at rest that God may work in us; we must yield *our* desires; we must resign our heart; we must give up our fleshly desires."^[23]

It is surely true that what diverts one soul from "attending to God," may facilitate genuine Sabbath keeping for another. However, the danger of self-deception is great. Whatever else Sabbath keeping might mean, it certainly requires the serious attempt to have God alone fill our attention and desire to the exclusion of other objects of concern. Is it reasonable to expect that any such serious attempt to glorify and enjoy God could succeed without definite restrictions and self-denials? Slavery does not consist merely of doing forced labor without compensation. Failure to do what one recognizes as good and wishes to accomplish is equally indicative of human servitude (Romans 7:14-24).

When mundane tasks and otherwise innocent pleasures divert our attention from the Sabbath communion with God we require, we have become our own cruelest taskmasters. We think we must finish every job. We cannot stop. There are deadlines to meet, obligations to fulfill, things which *must* be taken care of. There are conferences and business commitments. There is house cleaning, laundry, shopping. We drive ourselves day in and day out, and "we think we are free!"[\[24\]](#)

Unfortunately, we do not leave this frenzy of activity behind when the weekend arrives. From the Sunday morning scramble through metropolitan newspapers to the tedium of motor car excursions to competitive sports, we transfer the tension of the weekdays to the weekend.

Sabbath prohibitions meet this cycle of frenetic enslavement with a resounding "NO!" and chart out for us a better way. Out of the raging sea of this - worldly burdens and pleasures, the Sabbath invites us to an "island in time," in which as Christian pilgrims we may taste and see that the Lord is good, and that He is the one whose work has always and will always sustain His children. In this way we may begin to anticipate and enjoy our heavenly citizenship before the time.

Until communion with God secures its rightful pre-eminence in our desires, inferior concerns and demands are bound to crowd out and deny our fundamental need for our Heavenly Father. Sabbath prohibitions are necessary in order to clear space for the recognition and satisfaction of this original desire and so, also, for the fulfillment of our true nature and destiny. By denying lower appetites, the higher appetite asserts its

superiority and its priority so that in Sabbath self-denial we are free first for God and then, in Him, for ourselves:

If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the Lord's holy day honorable,
and if you honor it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
then you will find your joy in the Lord,
and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.
The mouth of the Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 58:13-14)





¹Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin, *To Be a Jew* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1972), p. 72.

²Boaz Cohen, *Sabbath Prohibitions Known as Shebut* (New York: W. F. Albright, 1949), p. 21.

³Abram Kanof, "Sabbath," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 14 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1971), p. 557.

⁴Hans-Joachim Krause, *Worship in Israel* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), p. 79.

⁵Simon Greenberg, *A Jewish Philosophy and Pattern of Life* (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1981), p. 347.

⁶Donin, p. 63.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Kanof, p. 559.

¹⁰Nathan S. Barack, *A History of the Sabbath* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1965), p. 14.

¹¹Kraus, p. 87.

¹²Cf., "The Westminster Shorter Catechism," of A.D. 1647: "Question. 1. What is the chief end of man? Answer. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 675.

¹³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 3:2, p. 457.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 458.

¹⁵Steven S. Schwarzchild, "The Messianic Doctrine in Contemporary Jewish Thought," *Concepts that Distinguish Judaism* (Washington, D.C.: B'nai B'rith Books, 1985), p. 245.

¹⁶Kanof, p. 562.

¹⁷An early Jewish exposition of the underlying significance of a Bible text.

¹⁸Donin, p. 62.

¹⁹Barack, dedication page.

²⁰Donin, p. 62.

²¹Donin, pp. 89-96.

²²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II:vii, 29. Emphasis mine.

²³Ibid. Cf. J. I. Packer, *A Quest For Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), pp. 236-243.

²⁴Ibid., p. 68.



Revival and Revivalism: **A Review Article**

Terry Chrisope

*Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring
of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858.*

by Iain H. Murray, Banner of Truth Trust, 1994. xxii + 455 pp. \$27.95

This is a book for which I have waited twenty years. It is a treatment of a crucial period in American religious history by one who is thoroughly familiar with the literature of revival and who possesses the theological stance and critical acumen properly to evaluate the events it relates. As a result, the issues raised by Iain Murray's treatment are nothing less than momentous for Southern Baptists as well as for evangelicalism at large.

Murray's essential argument is packed into his title and subtitle. He contends that there is a difference between revival and revivalism, a difference that has been lost both to American evangelicalism and to academic historians. Genuine revival is the result of the activity of the Spirit of God in human lives and in human history, and is not under human control. Revivalism, in contrast, is the manifestation of human activism, energy, and organization and may exist where the Spirit of God is not active in any extraordinary way. Murray argues that the blurring of this distinction was accomplished during and after the Second Great Awakening in America in the first half of the nineteenth century, and that it came about under the influence of American Methodism and of Presbyterian evangelist Charles G. Finney. It is the resultant emergence of revivalism that constitutes for Murray the marring of American evangelicalism.

Murray sets the scene for these developments by first surveying what he considers genuine revivals which occurred during the latter part and the aftermath of the Great Awakening, primarily during the second half of the eighteenth century, especially among Presbyterians and Baptists. He makes pertinent observations concerning the nature and characteristics of these revivals, including the Calvinistic theological orientation of their leaders and the absence of any special means for promoting revival.

The middle chapters of the book treat the Second Great Awakening, which occupied the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Here Murray takes note of the strong Methodist influence upon the theology and practice of revival, an influence which encouraged the organization of mass meetings, the recording of the number of conversions, and the use of the "altar call" or invitation to come forward. For various reasons these innovations became widely accepted, and it is in these developments that Murray thinks revivalism was born as a humanly-engineered means of producing purportedly spiritual results.

The final third of the book describes the popularization of revivalism in American Christianity. A theology and practice similar to those of Methodism were to flourish in the East under the impetus provided by Charles G. Finney who, though not originating these methods, became instrumental in popularizing and spreading them. The theological underpinning of Finney's approach was the assumption of complete human ability to respond to the demands of the gospel and the corresponding need to utilize all available means to promote what was called "revival." Division among Christians occurred as adherents of the older theology of revival as a sovereign work of God raised questions about and objections to Finney's "new measures" and the theology which underlay them. Those who raised such questions were soon castigated as being "anti-revival" and as opposed to evangelism, although this

patently was not the case. It seemed to many that a new era in evangelism and revival was being born, and the claim appeared to be supported by the numbers of new converts being produced. The use of the prescribed means of protracted meetings, emotional appeals, and altar calls were supposed to unfailingly produce the desired revival, and if they did not it was due to human fault rather than to any contrary purpose in the divine will. This new approach swept Baptists and virtually all other Protestants before it and became the accepted understanding of revival by the end of the century. Any remembrance of the older concept of revival was all but lost.

Murray's study is quietly powerful and persuasive. His argument gathers strength as it advances through the book. A brief review can hardly do it justice. But some of the issues that Murray raises are worthy of noting here and should provoke serious discussion, especially among Southern Baptists, who, generally speaking, have assimilated and institutionalized the methods advocated by Finney and his followers.

The first and perhaps most fundamental issue to be raised by this book is that of the theology of conversion. Prior to approximately 1830 a Calvinistic conception of human inability and the necessity for the operation of divine grace prevailed among American Protestants except for the Methodists. A corresponding understanding of revival as a sovereign outpouring of divine power accompanied this view. After 1830 the Methodist theology of conversion (known as Arminianism or semi-pelagianism) became gradually but widely accepted. This view sees conversion as dependent on the response of the autonomous human will rather than being the result of the special work of the Holy Spirit. This theology was associated with a new view of revivals, one which saw them as the product of the human means used to promote them. This revised understanding of conversion and revival had no more energetic proponent than Charles G. Finney, whose views came to prevail among American evangelical Protestants.

The question which this issue presents to Southern Baptists is this: Can the Reformed theology of conversion found in such documents as the Baptist Confession of 1689 (widely adopted among American, including Southern, Baptists) and taught by such theologians as John L. Dagg and James P. Boyce be squared with the theology underlying Finneyite revivalism? If not, then can the Calvinistic theology of our heritage be shown to be erroneous or unscriptural? If it can then the shift to the new theology is warranted. But if it cannot, then the whole enterprise of revivalism and its underlying theology is brought into question. At the very least, the issue needs to be seriously addressed by thoughtful Southern Baptists. If the founders of the convention and its institutions are to be repudiated along with their Reformed soteriology, then let it be done with full awareness of the heritage that is being rejected. But if the older Baptist confessions and the founders of our convention are found to embrace a theology more faithful to the Biblical witness, then the new theology and its understanding of revival must in due course be corrected and a return to the more Biblical position be pursued.

A second issue that presents itself is the general condition of contemporary Christianity. Opponents of revivalism in the nineteenth century predicted dire consequences for the churches should the new mode of operation prevail. We do in fact seem to be witnessing the fulfillment of their predictions. Several questions occur to the thoughtful observer: Why is there such a low spiritual condition among the evangelical churches of this land? Why is it that a large percentage of the "converts" produced by modern evangelistic methods seem to fall away and count for nothing except statistics in organizational reports (see the comment on George Barna's recent report under the "News" section of this issue)? Why are the majority of members in most Southern Baptist churches non-active or non-resident members?

Could it be that the answer to these questions is that during the past seventy-five years our churches began to engage in a faulty evangelism that focuses not on divine grace but on a presumed human ability to effect self-regeneration? Could it be that due to this faulty approach many of the supposed converts are not really converted at all? Could it be that this is why many "converts" fade away when the excitement of the moment ceases? Could it be that many of these "half-converted" (read "unregenerate") souls fill our churches and there manifest their spiritual deadness?

To take the matter further: Why has there been no general revival in the United States since that of 1857-58 (which Murray treats at the end of his book)? Could it be that the man-centered theology and methods that were intended to promote revival have had the opposite effect and in fact serve to hinder genuine revival? And, we must ask, how could the opponents of Finney's methods predict accurately in the 1830s and 1840s the spiritual devastation that would occur as a result of the new approach? As Murray points out, later generations were largely uncomprehending of why these men raised doubts about revivalism "Why Archibald Alexander believed that acceptance of 'the new religion' would mean that the glory had departed; why Nettleton thought acceptance would be 'ruinous to the cause of revivals'; why John W. Nevin held that if the old orthodoxy lost the struggle, the failure would shape the 'entire complexion and history' of the churches in time to come" (p. 357). The reason these men were able to make such claims-which now seem to be fully justified-is not that they were prescient but that they were guided by a doctrinal understanding which gave them spiritual insight into the outcomes of the new theology and new measures.

Third, and certainly at the center of all these questions, is an issue with which it will be extremely difficult for many Southern Baptists to deal objectively and scripturally. It is the issue of the altar call or invitation system (which is *not* synonymous with inviting people to come to Christ). Murray argues that the use of this device-calling on hearers to respond with some kind of physical movement, such as coming forward in a service-reflects a theology which replaces divine grace with a human ability which is strong enough to respond to God and the demands of the gospel. The older, Calvinistic theology denies any such ability, thus leaving the hearer shut up to divine grace as the only answer to his needs-a grace which must bestow a believing heart as well as forgiveness of sins. The new theology posits full human ability to respond any time one wills to do so; the only thing needed is the presentation to the hearer of the proper motivation to encourage and secure his response. With this view arose the direct appeal to "do something" physical which is embodied in the altar call.

But a great danger is involved here. It is the danger that a physical movement (coming forward) will be confused with a spiritual act (believing on Christ), thus potentially deceiving those who respond with the called-for physical movement. Sadly, such confusion is found too often within Southern Baptist Churches today.

The great difficulty is, of course, that the invitation system has become so institutionalized in Southern Baptist life that many people-laymen as well as pastors and preachers-cannot conceive of evangelism taking place in any other way. Indeed, questioning biblical propriety of the altar call would be viewed by many as an assault on evangelism. And certainly it is the case that the altar call is the means by which evangelists and pastors count converts and by which churches count new members and gauge the effectiveness of preachers. Many people, therefore, will feel threatened by the suggestion that the invitation system as it is commonly practiced is the outgrowth of bad theology. And yet, a careful perusal of the history presented by Murray indicates that this is precisely the case. The altar call was the central innovation of revivalism, the practical and symbolic embodiment of its theology. Its elimination may be the first necessary step toward the recovery of genuine revival.

Fourth, it is likely that the mentality of revivalism tends to promote anti-intellectualism in the churches and among evangelical Christians affected by it. Its simplistic theological approach and its overemphasis on the emotions and will discourage the serious attention to theology known by our spiritual forefathers, resulting in the "dumbing down" of the church. Consequently, many modern Christians and their pastors are not only unable to engage in theological discourse but are also unable to engage the surrounding culture at the intellectual level. I suspect that the theological vacuity, emotionalism, and intellectual superficiality of revivalism turn away many intelligent people from a consideration of the truth claims of Christianity. Such factors may also push intellectually serious people within evangelical churches away from historic Christianity and toward moderatism, liberalism, neo- orthodoxy, or liturgically oriented churches. Furthermore, revivalism gives opponents of Christianity a tool for discounting the reality of the supernatural in contemporary Christian life: if results can be obtained by emotional manipulation,

bypassing the mind, then there is no need to attribute any effects to the influence of the Spirit of God.

Among the other issues raised by Murray's book, a fifth and final one must be mentioned. That is the question of a Christian approach to history. Mark Noll, a historian at Wheaton College and a prolific author, has criticized Murray's work as subsuming historical study under the discipline of theology and of engaging in an approach which Noll labels "tribalism." Quoting historian Grant Wacker, Noll considers tribalism to be "scholarship that is fashioned with private or factional or parochial or ethnic-in a word, non-public-criteria of what counts for good evidence, reliable warrants, and sound conclusions." In this approach the details are "all linked by explanatory frameworks that only insiders find credible" (*Christianity Today*: April 24, 1995, p. 34).

This sounds a good deal like the way the New Testament was written and, in fact, still must be understood. One can savingly grasp its meaning only as illuminated by the Spirit of God and regenerated unto spiritual life. If regeneration possesses any reality and is not merely a figment of the Christian imagination, then it will, among other things, reorient one's thinking toward God's purposes in history as explained in the Scriptures. The Bible, then, when interpreted correctly, provides the Christian with a set of criteria for making historical judgments, judgments which will at times conflict with those made by unbelievers. And the criteria are grasped only by insiders-the regenerate, that is, Christian believers. Admittedly, it is notoriously difficult to discern God's purposes in the workings of providence, yet this difference between a Christian approach and the world's approach to history is what makes the Christian approach distinctive-and Christian. This is what Murray is affirming and Noll seems to be denying. The question becomes particularly acute when dealing with alleged manifestations of divine activity in history such as revivals. We may thank Murray and Noll for drawing attention to this problem while acknowledging that further discussion is needed.

In sum, Murray's case is presented persuasively and without rancor. Whether his argument will be used to effect reformation is in the hands of our sovereign God. Certainly there will be stout resistance, for modern evangelicalism is steeped in the ethos of revivalism and many frequently cannot conceive of any other mode of church life and evangelism.

If I had it in my power to require Southern Baptist pastors to read any single book this year besides the Bible, this is the one I would choose. I know of nothing better calculated to provoke the discussion of fundamental issues that is so desperately needed in Southern Baptist circles. Not only are the honor of God and the spiritual health of the churches at stake, but the eternal destinies of people as well.



News

1996 SBFC Midwest Report

The first gathering of the Southern Baptist Founders Conference Midwest left participants and organizers very encouraged with a sense of obvious blessing from above. The conference convened March 5-7 in St. Louis, MO under theme of "Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God." More than fifty registered for the conference several sessions were joined by numerous visitors. Between excellent speakers (including Tom Nettles, R. F. Gates, and Don Whitney) and good book buys, participants shared fellowship and encouragement about the deep truths of the Word of God.

Next year's Midwest conference has been scheduled to convene at the same location March 11-13. The theme will be "Revival & Reformation." All ministers and interested church members are welcome. For more information contact:

Curtis McClain, Committee Chairman
8454 Engler Ave.
St. Louis, MO 63114
(314) 428-4079

Chuck Todd, Conference Treasurer
313 S. East St.
Pinckneyville, IL 62274
(618) 357-9220

1996 Founders Conference Southwest Announcement

The Southwest Regional Founders Conference is scheduled to meet once again outside of Lubbock, TX in First Baptist Church of Roosevelt October 1-3. The theme is "The Life and Labor of the Christian Pastor." Among the speakers are Tom Nettles of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Don Whitney of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. For more information contact:

Rusty Canoy, Committee Chairman
Rt. 1 Box 398
Lubbock, TX 79401
(806) 842-3433

Founders Journal Wins Award

Ministry Computing Resources, publishers of *Desktop Publishing and New Media Resources*, has recognized the *Founders Journal* with their Award of Merit for "outstanding work in Desktop publishing" for 1995. Evaluations were made on the basis of design, content, writing and production.

Pollster Calls Modern Christianity "Shallow"

George Barna, the data gathering guru of the information age, has statistically verified that which some evangelicals have been claiming for years (see *FJs* 5, 10, & [19/20](#)): the content and results of much that goes under the name of "evangelism" today are severely damaging our churches. "Christians don't understand the fundamentals of the faith," Barna told those attending a seminar on Nashville, TN on Feb. 19. "Christianity is so shallow there's not depth to build on." Citing research that shows that 58% of American adults cannot name half of the Ten Commandments, the pollster warned that in the next ten years Americans may well see "massive moral anarchy take over our country."

Another disturbing fact which he has discovered is that a majority of people who "make decisions" to become Christians have dropped out of church participation within six to eight weeks. "We lose them not temporarily but eternally. They think they got it already. We've given them the false impression that they've got it together spiritually."

If this information is even considered by evangelicals, and if the response is true to form, then we may expect to hear much about the need to "do better followup" in order to rectify this problem. Somewhere, somehow, however, Christian leaders must begin to move beyond this standard, superficial prescription for dealing with our massive number of "converts" who do not persevere even two months. Could it be that the problem is not with followup but with the content and methodology of our evangelism?

If the majority of automobiles which General Motors produced did not run after six weeks, do you think that their executives could get away with blaming it on poor maintenance? No doubt those responsible for design and production would be forced to reexamine their whole method of operation based on the fundamental principles of engineering. How much more willing, then, should those be whose responsibility it is to care, not for cars but for souls, to reexamine our evangelistic practice in the light of God's Word! We must do so. For, as Barna rightly observes, the current practice is a travesty for which leaders of the modern church will face God's judgment.

Theology Still Matters

At least it does to a group of Baptist pastors in New England. For the last two years they have met quarterly as the "Theology Still Matters" fraternal. Their day-long meetings are divided between studying systematic theology (currently using James P. Boyce's and John L. Dagg's works), pastoral theology (using Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*), and contemporary issues. In June of this year they plan to host a special conference with special guest speaker, Richard Belcher from Columbia Bible College and Seminary. For more information contact Pat Leahy by phone at 203/468-6030.

Founders Journal *On-Line*

For those who are "well-connected" the *Founders Journal* has recently established a home page on the World Wide Web. [I suppose if you're reading this, you already know! -sjr] The online version of the *Journal* has received over 1700 "hits" by the last week of May. The complete edition of Issues 19-23 are now available, and back issues are being added as time allows. The web site address is <http://www.founders.org>, so visit us sometime soon! [Stan Reeves](#) is the webmaster and graphic design editor for the online version.



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I rejoice in the growing awareness of Reformed theology among Southern Baptists today. I know of nothing that has happened in the history of salvation since the days of James P. Boyce and B. H. Carroll which would make their understanding of God's grace obsolete in the modern world. To the contrary, a renewed commitment to the sovereignty of God in salvation, worship that centers on the glory of God rather than the entertainment of the audience, and a perspective on history and culture which sees Jesus Christ as Lord of time and eternity, all of this can only result in the building up of the Body of Christ.

At the same time, it is imperative for Reformed Southern Baptists to guard against the real dangers of hyper-Calvinism which emphasizes divine sovereignty to the exclusion of human responsibility and which denies that the offer of the gospel is to be extended to all peoples everywhere. And, as we call on our fellow Baptist brothers and sisters to return to the rock from which we were hewn, we must learn to live in gracious equipoise with some of them who don't ring all five bells quite the same way we do! In this regard we do well to heed the following statement by the great missionary statesman Luther Rice: "How absurd it is, therefore, to contend against the doctrine of election, or decrees, or divine sovereignty. Let us not, however, become bitter against those who view this matter in a different light, nor treat them in a super serious manner; rather let us be gentle towards all men. For who has made us to differ from what we once were? Who has removed the scales from our eyes?"

--Timothy George, ["Southern Baptist Theology--Whence and Whither?"](#) *Founders Journal*, Issue 19/20, Winter/Spring 1995, pp. 29-30.



Book Review

Christian Scripture: An Evangelical Perspective On Inspiration, Authority And Interpretation

by David S. Dockery, Broadman & Holman, 1995.

Reviewed by [A. J. Smith](#)

This is a well-written and much-needed defense of the historic doctrine of the Bible as God's revelation in written form. Dockery's work is brief and readable, unlike many other fine works on the subject which suffer from undue length and/or complexity.

The book begins with the current situation facing evangelical and mainline denominational churches, namely, the challenge of authority. While for evangelicals and fundamentalists the claim is that Scripture is the final authority, the problem remains of making that affirmation a living reality through sound interpretation and consistent application to life's situations.

Using the current problem as a catalyst for reexamining the doctrine of revelation, Dockery moves to a discussion of general and special revelation as given through nature, history and human experience, and through God-appointed prophets and apostles. He then looks at the incarnation as a basic analogy for understanding inscripturation. Here he addresses the basic question of Christian epistemology: "How do we know what we know?" If God has communicated himself and his truth to us, how did he do it?

Following this he enters into a discussion of the inspiration of the Bible, examining all the major views which have been set forth through the centuries. Within the context of inspiration it is impossible to discuss the self-revelation of the God who is Truth without dealing with the issue of errancy/inerrancy as it pertains to his word.

Affirming the historic position of the Church, Dockery says, "Yes!" to the question, "Can God use fallible people to write an inerrant book?" He also seeks to give a satisfactory answer to the question, "How can a book be written by men and still be inerrant?" He removes the extraneous elements from the question first so that we are looking at Scripture on its own terms. He also affirms that inerrancy is an implication of the doctrine of inspiration, based on 2 Timothy 2:14-17 (pp. 63-69). He further affirms the need for a return to the commitment to Scripture's authority as normative for the Church and the believer (pp. 70-73). This section of the book concludes with a look at the issues of canonicity and transmission of the biblical text from ancient times to today.

In the next major division in the work Dockery traces the history of biblical interpretation through the centuries. He begins with rabbinical interpretation, and then moves on to interpretive methods from the early church into medieval times. He discusses Reformational hermeneutics and post-Enlightenment higher criticism. Lastly, he seeks to set forth a hermeneutical method which will be true to the historical context of Scripture, interpretive principles used by Christ and the apostles, and applicable to the Church in the world today.

In his conclusion Dr. Dockery restates the principal issues surrounding the doctrine of Scripture and lays out eight confessional affirmations related to the doctrines of revelation and inspiration.

The Appendix was a well-written supplement to the book which served to highlight the historical setting of the doctrine of Scripture in Southern Baptist life.

Here is a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of *Christian Scripture*, beginning with its strengths, which far outweigh its weaknesses.

- Dockery writes with a warmth of conviction which is inviting to the reader.
- His logical pattern of development gives the book balance and symmetry.
- Writing in a homiletical style, Dockery makes good use of repetition as a means of reinforcing key points.
- Dockery presents an excellent summary of both the role and the handling of Scripture in various ages of the church in chapters 5-7 and the Appendix.
- Dockery clearly presents critical and hermeneutical issues the church has faced, highlighting typological, allegorical, Reformational (grammatical historical), and historical critical interpretational methodologies.
- He unashamedly affirms the Scripture as God's Word in written form.
- He addresses the mode of inspiration, speaking of it as "*concurisive*" verbal and plenary (p. 43).

Having noted all of these strengths, it is necessary to note that the book does have some weakness, most notably the following:

- There is a clear lack of detailed treatment of Jesus Christ in his prophetic office, either pre- or postincarnationally.
- On p. 23 Dockery states: "The proper setting of special revelation is Christian faith." This statement leaves open the question of whether or not the Bible is objective revelation from God where it is not received in faith.
- The work lacks balance in the treatment of Reformational and post-Reformational hermeneutics.
- Connecting some of the information in the Appendix with post-Reformational developments would have better shown the context of the drift from the historic affirmation of inerrancy by many Southern Baptists who were swept up in the Continental movement of higher criticism.

All things considered, Dockery has done an excellent job of bringing together information from Scripture, church history and tradition, and synthesizing it into a readable book. It would serve every pastor and theology instructor to take the time to read this work. Dockery clarifies many issues and misconceptions surrounding the debate about inerrancy and inspiration. With supplemental information from other sources, this book could even be used as the basis for teaching this important subject in our churches where many people need to have a renewed sense of confidence in their Bibles as the Word of God written.



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Calvinism, Hyper-Calvinism, & Arminianism: Issues Shaping Our Identity as Southern Baptists

It might be beneficial to distinguish Calvinism from hyper-Calvinism because the two are often confused. (Indeed some writers and teachers confuse them so often and so willingly that one must wonder if the practice is intentional.) In one sense, hyper-Calvinism, like Arminianism, is a rationalistic perversion of true Calvinism. Whereas Arminianism destroys the sovereignty of God, hyper-Calvinism destroys the responsibility of man. The irony is that both Arminianism and hyper-Calvinism start from the same, erroneous rationalistic presupposition: *Man's ability and responsibility are coextensive*. That is, they must match up exactly or else it is irrational. If a man is to be held responsible for something, then he must have the ability to do it. On the other hand, if a man does not have the ability to perform it, he cannot be obligated to do it.

The Arminian looks at this premise and says, "Agreed! We know that all men are held responsible to repent and believe [which is true, according to the Bible]; therefore we must conclude that all men have the ability in themselves to repent and believe [which is false, according to the Bible]." Thus, Arminians teach that unconverted people have within themselves the spiritual ability to repent and believe.

The hyper-Calvinist takes the same premise (that man's ability and responsibility are coextensive) and says, "Agreed! We know that, in and of themselves, all men are without spiritual ability to repent and believe [which is true, according to the Bible]; therefore we must conclude that unconverted people are not under obligation to repent and believe the gospel [which is false, according to the Bible]."

In contrast to both of these, the Calvinist looks at the premise and says, "Wrong! While it looks reasonable, it is not biblical. The Bible teaches both that fallen man is without spiritual ability *and* that he is obligated to repent and believe. Only by the powerful, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit is man given the ability to fulfill his duty to repent and believe." And though this may seem unreasonable to rationalistic minds, there is no contradiction, and it is precisely the position the Bible teaches.

Why are these things so important to our discussion? Baptists have been confronted with these theological issues throughout their history. The Arminianism--Calvinism--Hyper-Calvinism debate has played a decisive role in shaping our identity as Baptists, and particularly our identity as Southern Baptists.

--Tom Ascol, "From the Protestant Reformation to the Southern Baptist Convention: What Hath Geneva to Do with Nashville?"



