



How Does Doctrine Affect Evangelism?

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The Founders Journal

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A Lesson from Spurgeon on Evangelism

Tom Ascol

Charles Spurgeon has been aptly described as one of those "once-a-century" type of preachers in whom all of the powerful gifts which are useful in ministry are deposited.^[1] His life and labors stand today, more than one hundred years after his death, encouraging and challenging ministers of the gospel who face the third millennium.

Any study of his ministry immediately reveals a man obsessed with evangelism. From the moment of his conversion to his dying day, Spurgeon maintained a deep burden for souls. He was a fanatic about it--in all of the right ways. As a pastor he took to heart the apostolic injunction to "do the work of an evangelist." And he diligently tried to stir up evangelistic concern among his church and fellow preachers.

This fact confounds some students of Spurgeon's life. For, along with his evangelistic fervor (and, we might add, despite modern claims to the contrary), he never wavered from a strong commitment to the doctrines of grace. He clearly understood, personally believed, and powerfully proclaimed what is popularly called "Calvinism." And he did so not out of any kind of devotion to a man or philosophical system, but because he was convinced that the body of truth which historically flew under that banner was nothing other than biblical Christianity.^[2] It was this understanding which enabled him to preach Christ so simply and persuasively.

Some who disagree with Spurgeon's theology but appreciate his evangelism have difficulty reconciling his beliefs with his practice. Their reasoning typically goes like this: "Yes, Spurgeon was a Calvinist, but despite that fact, he was evangelistic." Such an analysis, however, completely misses the mark. It would be far more accurate to say that "Of course Spurgeon was a Calvinist, and *therefore* he was evangelistic." His devotion grew out of his doctrine and his belief gave direction to his practice.

It is here, perhaps more than anywhere else, that the "Prince of Preachers" has much to teach modern Baptists. There has been a return to Spurgeon's theology by many Baptists over the last twenty-five years. This theological renewal is growing exponentially. But what has not been seen is a commensurate growth in Spurgeon's kind of evangelism. And this ought to alarm all who want to see real, biblical renewal sweep across our churches.

There is a generation of Baptist ministers who grew up with evangelism that was modeled on salesmanship. And some modern evangelism workbooks are little different from Donald Trump's *The Art of the Deal*. This kind of evangelism has wreaked havoc on churches, filling membership rolls with unconverted people and utterly confusing believers about the nature of real Christianity. Such evangelism is deadly and must be rejected out of hand. But, as Jesus warned, when an unclean spirit goes out of a man, if it is not replaced, then it will return and bring with it "seven other spirits more wicked than himself, . . . and the last state of that man is worse than the first." (Matt. 12:45). False evangelism must be replaced by the true. And Spurgeon can point the way particularly in terms of inward attitudes and desires.

Spurgeon was a capital "C" Calvinist and a capital "B" Baptist but his CHRISTIANITY was written in all capitals. In an address to the students at the pastors' college he acknowledged the propriety of trying to make a paedobaptist a Baptist, and trying to help Arminians see that salvation is all of grace. "But," he said, "Our grand object is not the revision of opinions, but the regeneration of natures. We would bring men *to Christ*, and not to our own peculiar views of Christianity. . . . To make proselytes, is a suitable labour for Pharisees: to beget men unto God, is the honourable aim of ministers of Christ."^[3]

It is almost impossible to find a printed sermon of Spurgeon's which does not have some kind of appeal to the unconverted. They are filled with pleadings, arguments, warnings, and instructions to sinners, calling and inviting them to come to Christ. His own attitude is reflected in Bunyan's portrait of a true Gospel minister in *Pilgrim's Progress*. In his

first sermon at New Park Street, Spurgeon used this scene to describe how a Gospel minister ought to regard the souls of men and women.

John Bunyan gives a portrait of a man whom God intended to be a guide to Heaven; have you ever noticed how beautiful that portrait is? He has a crown of life over his head, he has earth beneath his feet, he stands as if he pleaded with men, and he had the Best of Books in his hand. Oh! I would that I were, for one moment, like that pattern preacher; that I could plead with men as John Bunyan describes. We are all of us ambassadors for Christ, and we are told that, as ambassadors, we are to beseech men as though God besought them by us. How I do love to see a tearful preacher! How I love to see the man who can weep over sinners; whose soul yearns over the ungodly, as if he would, by any means and by all means, bring them to the Lord Jesus Christ! I cannot understand a man who stands up and delivers a discourse in a cold and indifferent manner, as if he cared not for the souls of his hearers. I think the true gospel minister will have a real yearning over souls something like Rachel when she cried, "Give me children, or else I die;" so will he cry to God, that he may have his elect born, and brought home to him. And, methinks, every true Christian should be exceedingly earnest in prayer concerning the souls of the ungodly; and when they are so, how abundantly God blesses them, and how the church prospers! But, beloved, souls may be damned, yet how few of you care about them! Sinners may sink into the gulf of perdition, yet how few tears are shed over them! The whole world may be swept away by a torrent down the precipice of woe, yet how few really cry to God on its behalf! How few men say, "Oh that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I may weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" We do not lament before God the loss of men's souls, as it well becomes Christians to do."[\[4\]](#)

Spurgeon argued that it is not just certain kinds of preachers who can be soul-winners. Rather, every preacher should work hard to see his hearers saved.

From all our congregations a bitter cry should go up unto God, unless conversions are continually seen. If our preaching never saves a soul, and is not likely to do so, should we not better glorify God as peasants, or as tradesmen? What honour can the Lord receive from useless ministers? The Holy Ghost is not with us, we are not used of God for his gracious purposes unless souls are quickened into heavenly life. Brethren, can we bear to be useless? Can we be barren, and yet content?[\[5\]](#)

This passion, for Spurgeon, was unquenchable. He saw, quite rightly, that the manifested glory of God was at stake.

Once more, if we are to be robed in the power of the Lord, *we must feel an intense longing for the glory of God, and the salvation of the sons of men.* Even when we are most successful, we must long for more success. If God has given us many souls, we must pine for a thousand times as many. Satisfaction with results will be the [death-] knell of progress. No man is good who thinks that he cannot be better. He has no holiness who thinks that he is useful enough.[\[6\]](#)

This consuming passion will inevitably determine how a man preaches. For one thing, it will cause him to work hard to be plain in speech. "We shall say to ourselves. 'No; I must not use that hard word, for that poor woman in the aisle would not understand me. I must not point out that recondite difficulty, for yonder trembling soul might be staggered by it, and might not be relieved by my explanation.' . . . If you love men better, you will love phrases less."[\[7\]](#) The goal to see souls won to Christ through preaching will also cause a minister to work hard to be interesting. "How, in the name of reason, can souls be converted by sermons that lull people to sleep?"[\[8\]](#) Humor can play a legitimate role in preaching for this very reason. Spurgeon reasoned that it is "less a crime to cause a momentary laughter than a half-hour's profound slumber."[\[9\]](#)

He is so strong on this that it is easy to misunderstand him. He is not arguing that the preacher is responsible for the evangelistic success of his ministry. What he is responsible for is faithfulness to the evangelistic task. God in His sovereignty will save whom He will when and where he will. Spurgeon never doubted that. But, what he refuses to let us

forget is that at the heart of a faithful ministry is a deep passion for the souls of men and women. He said,

If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. And if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for.^[10]

If our doctrine does not lead to devotion, then something is seriously wrong. We have not finished with our task until head, heart and hand all agree. Such sanctified integration of our personalities will not be perfectly attained until we see our Lord face to face. But we must strive to that end here and now. Having received the evangel, we must be engaged in evangelism. And the more clearly we have grasped the former, the more passionately we should give ourselves to the latter.



¹ Erroll Hulse, "Spurgeon and His Gospel Invitations" in *A Marvelous Ministry*, (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 76.

² Spurgeon dismissed those who tried to equate "Calvinism" with devotion to everything that John Calvin taught or practiced. Such attempts are still made today by people who are simply ignorant of the historical issues and by those who know better but seem intent on misrepresenting and confusing the issues. He would agree completely with what the early Southern Baptist statesman, John Broadus, wrote in the *Western Recorder* (the state newspaper for Kentucky Baptists):

"The people who sneer at what is called Calvinism might as well sneer at Mont Blanc. We are not in the least bound to defend all of Calvin's opinions or actions, but I do not see how any one who really understands the Greek of the Apostle Paul or the Latin of Calvin or Turretin can fail to see that these latter did but interpret and formulate substantially what the former teaches" (A. T. Robertson, *Life and Letters of John A. Broadus*, [np:American Baptist Publication Society, 1901], 396-97).

See chapter 13, "A Defence of Calvinism" in *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography Volume 1: Early Years 1834-1859*, a revised edition, originally compiled by Susannah Spurgeon and Joseph Harrald (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981 reprint edition, Volume 1 first published 1962).

³ *The Soul Winner*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981 reprinted edition, first published 1964), 16.

⁴ *Autobiography*, vol. 1:329; cited in Hulse, "Spurgeon and His Gospel Invitations," 83-84.

⁵ From "What We Would Be" in the June, 1886 *Sword and Trowel*, an address to the Pastor's Conference at the College;

reprinted in *Sermons on Unusual Occasions*, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1978), 180.

⁶ *An All-Round Ministry*, 352.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁸ From "What We Would Be" in the June, 1886 *Sword and Trowel*; reprinted in *Sermons on Unusual Occasions*, 180.

⁹ *The New Park Street Pulpit Vol.1 1855*, preface.

¹⁰ *Spurgeon At His Best*, compiled by Tom Carter, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991 reprinted edition, first published 1988), 67.



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How Does Doctrine Affect Evangelism?

The Divergent Paths of Asahel Nettleton and Charles Finney

[Rick Nelson](#)

The average Southern Baptist (if such a person exists) offers a puzzled look upon hearing the name of Asahel Nettleton, the last great evangelist who espoused the doctrines of grace. Although Nettleton (1783-1844) saw thirty thousand persons converted during a decade of active ministry in the early nineteenth century, his legacy suffers from tragic neglect, if not active contempt, at the hands of contemporary church historians.

Charles G. Finney (1792-1875), on the other hand, has recently been the subject of another extensive biographical treatment.^[1] Widely regarded as the father of modern revivalism, Finney represents the watershed in the shift from Calvinism to Arminianism as the dominant theology of evangelism. Conservatives love Finney for his evangelistic zeal and liberals point with pride to his involvement in social reform. Mark A. Noll regards Finney as "the crucial figure in white American evangelicalism after Jonathan Edwards," with more lasting impact on the life of the emerging nation than Ralph Waldo Emerson, Daniel Webster, or Horace Mann.^[2]

Finney's legacy shaped the theology and methodology of evangelism generally, and Southern Baptist evangelism particularly. The publication of his major works, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* and *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, left an impact upon evangelism which reaches to the present. Southern Baptist emphases such as simultaneous crusades, crusade preparation, the public invitation system, and the use of the revival meeting as an evangelistic strategy are at least in part attributable to Finney's considerable influence on the evangelicalism of his day.

The careful student of Southern Baptist history knows that until the turn of the twentieth century, Reformed soteriology was the generally accepted stance in Convention life. Today's Southern Baptists have adopted a "Great Commission hermeneutic" which places a greater stress on human responsibility than divine sovereignty in the soteriological equation.^[3] As one result of this shift in philosophy, Southern Baptists have now adopted a jumbled hybrid of Calvinism and Arminianism. They want to be Calvinistic in affirming the sinfulness of man and the permanence of genuine salvation, but balk at the Reformed doctrines of unconditional election, particular redemption, and the triumphant nature of divine grace. Bill Leonard correctly characterizes Southern Baptist soteriology as confused:

Heirs of both the Calvinist and the Arminian traditions, they often selected and popularized diverse doctrines of salvation which, when held together, had the potential for serious theological confusion.^[4]

The puzzled state of Southern Baptist soteriology has produced a mixed bag of results. Jesus personally acknowledged that even the kingdom of heaven contains a mixture of genuine wheat and counterfeit in the parable of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43). Although Southern Baptists proudly lay claim to the distinction of being the largest non-Catholic denomination in the United States, sickly spiritual fruit hangs in the churches to the point that the President of the SBC emphasized the need for genuine conversion among church members in his 1997 President's Address. When millions of our church members do not give any credible biblical evidence of salvation by attending church faithfully and living at least a nominal Christian life, will eternity not expose our beloved Southern Baptist Zion as polluted by pragmatism and pride if no one dares to mention that the problem may lie in a methodology with a faulty doctrinal foundation? The enemy is quite capable of sowing counterfeit seed in the field without the help of sincere, yet careless, Southern Baptists who do not see the reasoning inherent in some popular evangelistic methods.

This article asserts that what a person, church, or denomination believes about salvation has a direct relationship on the evangelism they practice.^[5] Soteriology shapes evangelistic methodology. The assumption is that a sound doctrine of salvation should produce a sound practice of evangelism.

Asahel Nettleton's God-Centered Revivalism

Following the theological lead of Jonathan Edwards, who stressed human responsibility within a Calvinistic world view, Asahel Nettleton represented the quintessential New England Calvinist of his day. While he held firmly to each of the tenets of the Synod of Dort (also known as the Five Points of Calvinism) as understood by his New England theological predecessors (Edwards, Joseph Bellamy, and Timothy Dwight), he first and foremost believed his doctrinal system to be true to biblical revelation.^[6]

Nettleton's system of beliefs may be summarized as follows. Man, being totally depraved in nature and by choice, cannot save himself.^[7] By God's grace, some have been chosen unto eternal life.^[8] For those chosen by God (the elect), Jesus provided a penal, substitutionary atonement for their sins on the cross.^[9] The elect, for whom alone Jesus died, will be drawn by the triumphant grace of God to repentance and saving faith in Christ.^[10] They will be kept by God unto eternal salvation.^[11]

Human beings must be divinely regenerated, or have their sinful nature negated, before they can repent and trust Christ for salvation.^[12] In Nettleton's system, human ability to respond at every stage of salvation comes from a sovereign act of God. Unless God moves, humans remain hopelessly lost.^[13]

The methodology of Nettleton matched his theology. He used preaching as a means of bringing sinners to conviction of their sinfulness. He bathed all evangelistic efforts in fervent, humble prayer to the God who alone can effect the regeneration of a lost person. For those who responded to a call for the awakened to meet outside stated services, Nettleton offered inquiry meetings, which were essentially group evangelistic counseling sessions. At these meetings, individuals could receive personal assistance without public pressure to respond.

Few men have approached the level of expertise Nettleton demonstrated in personal evangelism. He was a skillful surgeon of the soul. He urged those who had been awakened to settle the matter of salvation privately before God. Multitudes came to saving faith in Christ as a result of his ministry in "waste places" and churches of all sizes and types. Few of his converts ever abandoned their profession to return to the world.

Charles Finney's Man-Centered Revivalism

Charles G. Finney determined from his earliest days as a young Christian to counteract what he believed to be the evangelism-crippling effects of the Calvinism espoused by men such as Nettleton. Believing himself to be a corrective for an overemphasis on divine sovereignty, Finney stressed the responsibility of human beings as free moral agents.

Because he was trained as a lawyer and tragically lacking in theological education, Finney's reading of Scripture persuaded him to see salvation in terms of legalistic moral philosophy. Such a framework demanded that those held responsible to obey the law must be free to obey. While Nettleton stressed the freedom of God, Finney chose to emphasize the freedom of man.

Finney believed humans were voluntarily, not constitutionally, depraved. Election unto salvation resulted from divine foreknowledge of one's response to the gospel. The atonement provided by Jesus paid for no one's sins as a penal substitution, but rather allowed God to pardon sinners without violating his own nature and law.^[14] Michael Horton has accurately summarized Finney's beliefs: "God is not sovereign; man is not a sinner by nature; the atonement is not a true payment for sin; justification by imputation is insulting to reason and morality; the new birth is simply the effect of successful techniques; and revival is a natural result of clever campaigns."^[15]

Because humans are free moral agents, Finney believed they could reject the grace of God. Even after repenting and

professing faith in Christ, a person's ultimate salvation remained unsettled pending their obedience until death.[\[16\]](#)

Finney's theology caused him to perceive that only one enemy, a stubborn will, hindered the salvation of all persons. Each method Finney used was evaluated on the basis of its effectiveness in "breaking" the obstinate will of sinners. This pragmatism dominated Finney's ministry. Wielding an amalgamation of methods already being used, Finney revolutionized evangelism and birthed modern revivalism. He popularized a more dramatic form of preaching, used public prayer as a tool for applying pressure to sinners, allowed women to pray in mixed public meetings, denounced opponents, changed the accepted tradition in inquiry meetings, organized small group prayer meetings and home visitation teams, gave rise to the protracted evangelistic campaign, and paved the way for what later became the public invitation system. These new measures caused great controversy, but they also reportedly brought as many as five hundred thousand persons "to renewal."[\[17\]](#)

Applications for Contemporary Evangelism

The findings are applicable to modern evangelism on two levels. First, what principles may be gleaned from the study? Second, which man offers a better example for the future of Southern Baptist evangelism, Nettleton or Finney?

Methodologically, commonalities between Finney and Nettleton offer an excellent starting point for principles of application. If preaching is marked by passion, faithfulness to Scripture, pertinent personal application, lucid presentation, and spiritual power, evangelism will be enhanced. If ministers and church members take up the labor of prayer as did Finney and Nettleton and their co-laborers in revivals, evangelism will be revolutionized. They not only practiced personal prayer but organized the praying of churches in revival preparation. If inquirers are properly counseled without being publicly pressured to make premature (and thus spurious) decisions, the results of evangelism will be conserved to a greater degree. If ministers and church members would practice theologically precise personal evangelism, churches would be transformed by the infusion of new spiritual life.

If Southern Baptists look to these great evangelists of the past for a model for the future of evangelism, which of these men would make the most desirable example? Two reasons lead me to choose Nettleton: (1) the legacy of Finney cannot stand the strain of vigorous examination; and (2) the more one looks at the legacy of Nettleton, the more clearly a picture of doctrinal balance emerges.

The legacy of Charles Finney has long been disputed. Southeastern Seminary evangelism professor Alvin L. Reid notes:

Finney is credited with providing the impetus for the shift from the work of God to the work of humans in revival and spiritual awakening. . . . The public invitation, protracted meetings (now often called 'revival services' or simply 'revivals'), and preparation for such meetings can be traced in large measure to Finney. He has been praised and condemned for this shift. In evaluating Finney, one must remember that he was reacting to the cold, lifeless, extreme version of Calvinism of his day.[\[18\]](#)

Many of the multitudes touched by Finney's ministry turned back to the world after the local influence of the charismatic evangelist faded. B. B. Warfield warned that "a very large proportion of those swept into the churches by the excitement of the revival were not really converted, as their subsequent history only too clearly proved."[\[19\]](#)

Lest one should dismiss Warfield as a Princeton Calvinist and enemy of Finney, the testimonies of Finney's friends and co-laborers James Boyle and Asa Mahan offer further evidence that Finney's work must be viewed with serious reservation, if not suspicion. James E. Johnson has admitted that such testimonies give credence "to the accusation that many individuals were swept along in the excitement of the revival meetings who never actually experienced a change of heart."[\[20\]](#) Boyle wrote to Finney in 1834:

Let us look over the fields where you and others and myself have labored as revival ministers, and what is now their moral state? What was their state within three months after we left them? I have visited and revisited many of these fields, and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, contentious state into which the churches had fallen--and fallen very soon after our first departure from among them.[\[21\]](#)

Mahan wrote in his *Autobiography* that not only many people supposedly converted in the revivals, but also the pastors of churches who hosted meetings, and even the evangelists leading the meetings, subsequently suffered morally and spiritually. He wrote,

I was personally acquainted with nearly every one of them--I cannot recall a single man, brother Finney and father Nash excepted, who did not after a few years lose his unction, and become equally disqualified for the office of evangelist and that of pastor.[\[22\]](#)

Michael S. Horton has vigorously taken the lead among evangelicals in attacking the legacy of Finney. Horton portrays Finney as the spiritual father of the church growth movement, Pentecostalism, and political revivalism. He accuses Finney (with Finney's own words) of denying these cardinal doctrines: original sin, penal substitution as the motif of the atonement, and the divine nature of the new birth.[\[23\]](#)

Because Finney repudiated so many key tenets of the historic Christian faith, Horton calls the evangelist "not only an enemy of evangelical Protestantism, but of historic Christianity of the broadest sort." Horton concedes that Finney was correct in only one point: "The Gospel held by the Westminster divines who he attacked directly, and indeed held by the whole company of evangelicals, is 'another gospel' in distinction from the one proclaimed by Charles Finney." Horton then asks a haunting question for evangelicals who have unwittingly, in the name of evangelistic success, placed Finney on a hero's pedestal: "With which gospel will we side?"[\[24\]](#)

Monte Wilson rightly ties Finney to the changes in evangelism and sees Finney's incorrect estimate of human nature to be the root of his belief that "revivals could be planned, promoted, and propagated by man." The modern tendency to rely on technique in revival preparation may be attributed to an adoption of Finney's false premise. When evangelism is evaluated only on the basis of results, Finney must bear the brunt of responsibility. When ministers who do not produce the appropriate numbers are ignominiously dismissed from their pulpits, the wise observer sees Finney's maxim, "a wise minister will be successful," behind the tragedy.[\[25\]](#)

Finney believed that if all ministers would follow his example, revival would sweep the land, ushering in the millennium. Only one decade after his trademark book of revival methodology, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, was published, he complained that revivals had declined, both in quantity and quality. Wilson correctly comments: "By Finney's own standard, his teachings on how to produce converts and revival, as well as their underlying assumptions, were proven wrong."[\[26\]](#) Only eternity will tell how many who were beginning to experience genuine conviction of sin in Finney's revivals were hurried through a spurious salvation decision to the peril of their eternal souls.

Finney became a major catalyst in changing the theology that undergirds evangelism. As Arminianism supplanted Calvinism, man replaced God as the center of the theology of evangelism. Robert H. Lescelius correctly asserts that "it has remained so predominantly ever since in American evangelicalism."[\[27\]](#)

Finney's theology and ministry were built on the false premise that Calvinism harms evangelism. Sixty-five persons had been converted in the church into which Finney was baptized in the two years before his conversion.[\[28\]](#) Finney came to faith in Christ in the midst of a regional revival during a period when Calvinism dominated the theological landscape.

The premise remains as false today as it was in Finney's day. Finney's contemporary in Britain, the Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, built a great church and was committed to a Reformed soteriology. The phenomenally popular witness training program Evangelism Explosion came from a Presbyterian pastor, D. James Kennedy, whose church continues to

grow upon a Reformed theological base. Radio preacher and author John MacArthur, Jr., pastors a thriving church and holds Reformed views.^[29] One cannot successfully defend the premise that to take an Arminian soteriological stand is to become more evangelistic than a church with Reformed theology. Such a simplistic ploy did not prove plausible in Finney's day, and it will not today.

Finney's legacy must be regarded as perilous because of the anthropocentric nature of his theology and the methods resulting from that theology.^[30] In his effort to counter what he saw as an extreme form of Calvinism, Finney shifted the balance inordinately away from God and toward human agency in salvation. His evangelism missed the primary point of the gospel, a supernatural divine transformation of human beings from sinners to saints. His revivalism left behind churches which were arguably in worse condition because they split over the new measures or fired a godly minister who did not have the pulpit flair of the evangelist. Each of Finney's methods should be reevaluated with a critical view to its underlying theological foundation. For the future health of evangelism, the helpful must be separated from the harmful with regard to the ministry of Charles Finney.

On the other hand, Asahel Nettleton demonstrated the healthy potential of evangelism based on sound theology. The ministry of Nettleton did not harm churches; it built them up. Ministers who worked alongside him felt as if they had been blessed with an assistant pastor. Nettleton understood that the church existed before revival came and would continue to minister to the people of the community after the evangelist had moved to another venue. He believed it of utmost importance to guard the health of the church.

Compared to Finney's high rate of recidivism, Nettleton had a remarkable retention of converts from his meetings. Pastors commonly testified that after more than twenty-five years, nearly all professed converts continued as faithful followers of Christ.^[31]

Although Nettleton's numbers cannot match Finney's, one must wonder how many of those Finney supposedly won went back to the world. Compared to Finney, Nettleton labored in a much smaller field geographically. The places where he ministered were far less densely populated. One must wonder what could have happened if Nettleton had gone to the population centers visited by Finney.

Asahel Nettleton understood that "theology determines methodology."^[32] He conscientiously labored with souls in such a way as to honor the divine agency which would produce real conversion. Bennet Tyler's testimony described Nettleton's ministry as being like gentle rain showers which nourish parched soil and produce lasting spiritual fruit.^[33] James Ehrhard has stated that "most surprising to modern readers is the discovery that Nettleton's tremendous effectiveness occurred without any of the methods that modern evangelicals think are so essential in evangelism."^[34] Nettleton tested methodology by the standard of Scripture because he knew any other path would ultimately cause ruin, no matter how successful it seemed.

The legacy of Nettleton offers Southern Baptists a better foundation for the future of evangelism. He was not right because he was a Calvinist; he was right because he measured right and wrong by biblical revelation rather than human reason.^[35] He believed men were totally depraved in nature because the Bible taught it. He believed God must make the first move in salvation because Jesus so clearly stated it in John 6:44 and 6:65. He believed the atonement was a penal substitution because he thought Scripture portrayed it as such. He believed that persons could be reconciled to God only by faith in Christ and repentance toward God because of biblical teaching. He believed genuine believers would ultimately be known by holy lives because it was a biblical principle.

Southern Baptists have consistently pledged their allegiance to biblical revelation. They should reevaluate their commitment to the pragmatic evangelism of Finney by comparing it to the Bible. They would find that his views on human nature must be repudiated. He was wrong about the atonement being a payment for no one's sins in particular. He believed human agency played a much greater role in salvation than Scripture allows. Finney's errors in doctrine caused errors in practice which still plague Southern Baptists today, especially in the poor retention rate of new converts.

J. I. Packer's classic work *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* represents a more biblical position. Beginning with the assumption that God is sovereign over all and particularly in salvation, Packer describes the biblical tension of divine sovereignty and human responsibility as an antinomy which must be accepted.^[36] Packer warns those who stress human responsibility to the detriment of divine sovereignty that such an approach leads to a "pragmatic and calculating" evangelism with a philosophy akin to "brainwashing." He concedes that such evangelism would be appropriate "if the production of converts," not faithful proclamation of truth, were the Christian's responsibility.^[37] Packer also offers a warning to those who neglect human responsibility in order to exalt divine sovereignty. The temptation for these persons is to neglect the evangelistic responsibility of all believers under the assumption that God will save the elect. Packer reproves these believers, calling evangelistic apathy "inexcusable."^[38]

Citing the example of Spurgeon, who said he never tried to reconcile friends, Packer offers a sound and balanced perspective which recognizes the mutual dependence of the apparently contradictory truths. He wisely counsels, "In the Bible, divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not enemies. . . . They are *friends*, and they work together."^[39] This leads Packer to the conclusion: "The best method of evangelism . . . is the one which makes possible the most full and thorough explanation of the good news of Christ and His cross, and the most exacting and searching application of it."^[40]

As professing believers in biblical authority, Southern Baptists believe in human depravity and must stand against Finney with those who affirm that men are sinners in need of salvation, not self-induced moral reformation. They believe that salvation issues from the heart of a holy, yet gracious, God who provided a substitutionary atonement in the death of his son, Jesus Christ. They believe that salvation may be procured by repentance and faith in Christ in response to the gracious call of God through the convicting power of the Holy Spirit.

Those beliefs should compel Southern Baptists to repudiate their ideological and methodological association with Charles Finney and move closer to the model provided by Asahel Nettleton, who embodies the theology and practice upon which the Convention was founded. Finney believed his day needed a move toward Arminianism to achieve balance. His influence caused an extreme move in the direction of human responsibility. Southern Baptists need to counterbalance Finney's excessive shift toward man and achieve biblical balance in their theology and practice of evangelism once again.

In recent days, the author has rejoiced to hear Dr. Timothy George say that it is good that Southern Baptists are reopening dialogue about these crucial matters. It is positive, as Dr. George says, that we are talking about the doctrine of salvation these days instead of the ordination of homosexuals to the ministry. It witnesses to the certainty of biblical authority in our family of faith. Let us therefore come together with open Bibles, open hearts, Christ-controlled demeanor, and reestablish the rightful balance of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in Southern Baptist soteriology.



¹ Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, Library of Religious Biography, ed. Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

²Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 176-77.

³ Charles S. Kelley Jr., *How Did They Do It: The Story of Southern Baptist Evangelism* (n.p.: Insight Press, 1993), 21.

⁴Bill J. Leonard, "Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture," *Review and Expositor* 82, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 123.

⁵ Material in this article comes from my dissertation, "The Relationship of Soteriology and Evangelistic Methodology in the Ministries of Asahel Nettleton and Charles G. Finney" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997).

⁶ Bennet Tyler, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.*, 2d ed. (Hartford: Robins & Smith, 1848), 273.

⁷ Asahel Nettleton, *Asahel Nettleton: Sermons from the Second Great Awakening*, with an introduction by Tom Nettles and a preface by Bennet Tyler (Ames, IA: International Outreach, 1995), 394-95.

⁸*Ibid.*, 240.

⁹*Ibid.*, 236.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 105. Nettleton preached, "It is certain that Christ will finish the great work which he has undertaken. Not one whom he designs to save shall ever be lost."

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹² *Ibid.*, 60-73, see Nettleton's sermon entitled, "Genuine Repentance Does Not Precede Regeneration."

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¹⁵Michael S. Horton, "The Legacy of Charles Finney," *Premise* 2, no. 3, 27 March 1995 [journal on-line], available from <http://www.public.usit.net/capo/premise/95/march/horton-f.html>. Internet.

¹⁶ Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 550, writes, "If the ultimate salvation of the saints is certain, it is certain only upon condition, that their perseverance in obedience to the end of life is certain."

¹⁷ Paulus Scharpff, *History of Evangelism: Three Hundred Years of Evangelism in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States of America*, trans. Helga Bender Henry (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 109; John Mark Terry, *Evangelism: A Concise History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 146.

¹⁸*Evangelism and Church Growth: A Practical Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875)," by Alvin L.

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¹⁹ Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 2:23; Joseph I. Foot, "Influence of Pelagianism on the Theological Course of Rev. C. G. Finney, Developed in His Sermons and Lectures,," *Literary and Theological Review* 5 (March 1838): 39, wrote that "during ten years, hundreds, and perhaps thousands, were annually reported to be converted on all hands; but now it is admitted, that his (Finney's) real converts are comparatively few. It is declared, even by himself that 'the great body of them are a disgrace to religion.' "

²⁰ James E. Johnson, "The Life of Charles Grandison Finney" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1959), 399-400.

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²² Asa Mahan, *Autobiography: Intellectual, Moral, and Spiritual* (London: T. Woolmer, 1882), 229.

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²⁴ Ibid. Pyke, 53, notes that Finney's theory of the atonement "was enough outside the pale of orthodoxy to have been considered heretical in previous centuries."

²⁵ Monte A. Wilson, "Charles Grandison Finney: The Aftermath," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 97-99. Finney's statement is the title of one of his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, 161-79.

²⁶ Wilson, 100.

²⁷ Robert H. Lescelius, "The Second Great Awakening: The Watershed Revival," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 23. Pyke, 33 -34, writes, "By the end of the [nineteenth] century, American evangelicalism bore little resemblance to that of 1800. The theology of conversion was no longer theocentric, the focus in evangelism now being on man and his responsibility, not on God, His holiness, and His saving mercy."

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³¹ "Robert A. Swanson, "Asahel Nettleton: The Voice of Revival," *Fundamentalist Journal* 5, no. 5 (May 1986): 51.

³² Lescelius, 29.

³³ Bennet Tyler, *New England Revivals As They Existed at the Close of the Eighteenth and the Beginning of the Nineteenth*

Centuries (Boston: Massachusetts Sabbath School Society, 1846; reprint, Wheaton: Richard Owen Roberts, Publisher, 1980), 7 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

³⁴James Ehrhard, "Asahel Nettleton: The Forgotten Evangelist," *Reformation & Revival Journal* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 85-86.

³⁵Finney, on the other hand, rejected doctrines such as original sin because he deemed them offensive to human reason. John Stanley Mattson believes Finney deemed the Bible and reason to be co-equals as ultimate sources of authority. John Stanley Mattson, "Charles Grandison Finney and the Emerging Tradition of 'New Measure' Revivalism" (Ph. D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1970), 197.

³⁶"J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 18-22. Southern Seminary president R. Albert Mohler Jr. stressed that divine sovereignty and human responsibility "are parallel truths" in his 1997 spring convocation message. James A. Smith Sr., "Mohler: God's Sovereignty & Human Responsibility True," *The Tie* 65, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 27.

³⁷Packer, 27-28. The wise observer sees Finney's pattern of evangelism in this emphasis. John F. MacArthur Jr. indicts Finney as the source of modern evangelical pragmatism: "Finney was the first influential evangelist to suggest that the end justifies the means." MacArthur, 233.

³⁸Packer, 32-34.

³⁹Ibid., 35-36.

⁴⁰Ibid., 90. Asahel Nettleton embodied such a balanced evangelism because he affirmed divine sovereignty and human responsibility as equally biblical and carried out his ministry within the tension of the antimony they represent. Finney chose the extreme position which favors human freedom to the neglect of divine sovereignty.



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John Calvin on Evangelism and Missions

[Ray Van Neste](#)

Introduction

From his own lifetime onward John Calvin has been a controversial person. One controversy stems from the accusations leveled against him by many that he was completely unevangelistic and unconcerned about missions. A. M. Hunter, in his book on Calvin's teaching, said, "Certainly he [Calvin] displayed no trace of missionary enthusiasm."^[1] Some have even said that Calvin's teaching on predestination necessarily destroyed evangelistic fervor; "we are all familiar with the scornful rationalization that facilely asserts that his horrible doctrine of divine election makes nonsense of all missionary and evangelistic activity."^[2] Others, however, have said: "One of the natural results of Calvin's perspective of predestination was an intensified zeal for evangelism."^[3] Though some have used Calvin's teachings to excuse their apathy towards evangelism, a close examination of Calvin's historical context, his writings, and his actions would prove John Calvin to be a man truly committed to the spread of the gospel.

Historical Context

In order to understand John Calvin, or any other historical figure, one must understand the time in which the person lived and worked. Calvin emerged as a Reformation leader in 1536 with the publication of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* and remained in leadership until his death in 1564. Thus, Calvin was a generation after Luther, and the Reformation, well entrenched in Germany, was spreading all over Europe. However, there was little organization among the churches that had split with Rome. Historian Owen Chadwick noted that

The problem now was not the overthrow of the papacy, but the construction of new modes of power . . . In breaking down papal authority, the Reformation seemed to have left the authority of the Christian ministry vague and uncertain.^[4]

Protestant groups, who had been accustomed to strong central authority in Rome, were now only loosely organized and, though they claimed scripture for their authority, they disagreed on what the scriptures meant with regard to certain doctrines. By the time that Calvin gained prominence in 1536, Protestant churches were in great need of organization and structure in their doctrine and practice.

In addition to the disorganization within, there was a persecution from without. The scattered condition of Protestantism was only worsened by the intense efforts of the Roman Church to eradicate the Protestant movement. Protestant churches were struggling not only for their identity but also for their very survival. Calvin himself had to leave France for personal safety, and he wrote the first edition of the *Institutes* in response to the ill treatment of French Protestants. Identification with Protestantism brought immediate punishment, including torture and even death.

Obviously, Calvin's era was a time of intense difficulty for Protestant churches. The demands of the day led him to spend a considerable amount of his energy developing a church organization, writing theology, and training ministers. With such pressing needs one *might* understand if Calvin neglected evangelism or missions. After all, the church itself and its message must first be established. Moreover, preaching Reformation doctrine in areas other than the Protestant cities would mean almost certain death. However, even these pressing needs and problems, which would immobilize many churches today, did not stop the evangelistic efforts of Calvin and his followers.

Calvin's Writings

Calvin's writings on predestination have most often been targeted as unevangelistic and destructive to missionary zeal. Calvin addressed predestination primarily in related parts of his *Institutes* and in his treatise, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, which J. K. S. Reid called "the longest and most sustained exposition which Calvin wrote on the subject."^[5] Dealing with predestination in the *Institutes*, Calvin does not directly address evangelism specifically, but neither does he describe it as unnecessary. He does, in fact, write several times about the gospel being preached to the masses, resulting in the salvation of the elect and the hardening of the non-elect (III.23.10; II.5.10). In other words, Calvin did not limit the preaching of the gospel to those considered to be elect. He explains his views more fully in his treatise on predestination:

Since we do not know who belongs to the number of the predestined and who does not, it befits us so to feel as to wish that all be saved. So it will come about that, whoever we come across, we shall study to make him a sharer of peace . . . even severe rebuke will be administered like medicine, lest they should perish or cause others to perish. But it will be for God to make it effective in those whom He foreknew and predestined.^[6]

Calvin clearly encouraged Christians to be involved in evangelism! "It befits us" to desire all people to be saved. The result of this proper desire should make us try to lead everyone "we come across" to faith in Christ, for that is the only way they could share in peace. This is not to be a half-hearted effort. Christians are to use "even severe rebuke" if necessary to prevent others from ignoring the gospel and perishing. Christians must make the effort to evangelize everyone knowing that only God can save.

Calvin's doctrine of predestination did not make the preaching of the gospel unnecessary; instead, it made preaching necessary because it was by the preaching of the gospel that God had chosen to save the predestined.

Aside from his writings on predestination, Calvin also strongly supported the idea of missions with passages widely scattered throughout his commentaries.^[7] Commenting on Micah 2:1-4, Calvin states, "The Kingdom of Christ was only begun in the world when God commanded the gospel to be every where proclaimed and . . . at this day its course is not as yet complete."^[8] In other words the Great Commission was not fulfilled by the apostles and, consequently, this mission is still the responsibility of Christians.

Calvin expressed similar views as he commented on 1 Tim. 2:4, saying "there is no people and no rank in the world that is excluded from salvation; because God wishes that the gospel should be proclaimed to all without exception."^[9] He is not, of course, saying that everyone in the world would be saved, but that certain people from all parts of the world would be saved. The whole idea of the passage is that God desires "foreign nations" to hear the gospel and to be included in salvation. It is the Christian's duty "to be solicitous and to do our endeavor for the salvation of all whom God includes in his calling."^[10]

No one should be denied the opportunity of hearing the gospel proclaimed. Continuing to verse five of the same passage, Calvin writes that those people insult God "who, by their opinion, shut out any person from the hope of salvation."^[11] The gospel is to be preached indiscriminately to all people, and the decision about who will believe is to be left to God.

Indeed, Calvin never portrays God as a cruel tyrant grudgingly allowing some to be saved. In a comment on Ezek. 18:23, he states:

God certainly desires nothing more than for those who are perishing and rushing toward death to return to the way of safety. This is why the gospel is today proclaimed throughout the world, for God wished to testify to all the ages that he is greatly inclined to pity.^[12]

God desires for men to be saved and by His election has assured that some will be. It is the fact that God will definitely

call some that encourages believers to "bestow more toil and exertion for the instruction of rebels," realizing that "our duty is, to be employed in sowing and watering, and while we do this we must look for the increase from God."[\[13\]](#) Clearly, Calvin recognized the need for Christians to exert effort in evangelism in order to be used of God to call out His elect. He saw evangelism as a duty and employment involving "toil and exertion." Such is far from an indifferent attitude toward evangelism.

Calvin's Activity

Perhaps the best evidence of Calvin's concern for missions is the mission activity of the Genevan church under his leadership. Under Calvin's leadership, Geneva became "the hub of a vast missionary enterprise"[\[14\]](#) and "a dynamic center or nucleus from which the vital missionary energy it generated radiated out into the world beyond."[\[15\]](#) Protestant refugees from all over Europe fled to Geneva; they came not merely for safety but also to learn from Calvin the doctrines of the Reformation so they could return home to spread the true gospel. Philip Hughes notes that Geneva became a "school of missions" which had as one of its purposes

to send out witnesses who would spread the teaching of the Reformation far and wide It [Geneva] was a dynamic centre of missionary concern and activity, an axis from which the light of the Good News radiated forth through the testimony of those who, after thorough preparation in this school, were sent forth in the service of Jesus Christ."[\[16\]](#)

Thus was Calvin's missionary concern reflected in the church he served and the students he taught.

The pastors of Geneva, including Calvin himself, met regularly and kept sporadic notes of their actions in a register, which became the greatest source of information on the missionary activity in Geneva. In April 1555 the *Register of the Company of Pastors* for the first time listed men who were sent out from Geneva to "evangelize Foreign Parts."[\[17\]](#) The entry that mentioned these men stated that they had been sent out prior to April 1555, and they were already ministering in the Piedmont valleys.[\[18\]](#) More ministers may have been sent out before this time without being recorded in the *Register* because the notes were not complete and it was often dangerous to record the names of missionaries.

By 1557 it was a normal part of business for the Genevan pastors to send missionaries into France. Robert M. Kingdon called it a "concentrated missionary effort."[\[19\]](#) By 1562, religious wars had broken out in France, and it was no longer safe to record the names of missionaries. However, between 1555 and 1562 the *Register* records 88 men by name who were sent out from Geneva to different places as "bearers of the gospel."[\[20\]](#)

In reality many more than 88 were sent. In one year, 1561, though the *Register* mentions only twelve missionaries, other sources indicate that at least 142 missionaries were sent![\[21\]](#) Hundreds of men were sent out, reaching Italy, Germany, Scotland, England, and practically covering France.[\[22\]](#) From all over Europe requests came to Geneva for ministers of the gospel and the Genevan Company of Pastors filled as many as possible. At times even their own churches were deprived of pastors in order to meet the needs of struggling groups abroad.[\[23\]](#) Thus, Geneva, under Calvin's direction, served as the heart of the Reformation in Europe, pumping out the lifeblood of trained ministers into all areas.

In addition to the extensive work in Europe, one group of Genevan missionaries was sent to Brazil. The *Register* simply states that on Tuesday, August 25, 1556, M. Pierre Richier and M. Guillaume were sent as ministers to Brazil. "These two were subsequently commended to the care of the Lord and sent off with a letter from this church."[\[24\]](#) The ministers were sent in response to a request from Admiral Coligny, a Huguenot leader. They were to serve as chaplains for a group of Protestants who were going to Brazil to establish a colony, and they would have opportunity to instruct the natives in the gospel.[\[25\]](#) One man who went on the trip wrote that, upon receiving the request,

the church of Geneva at once gave thanks to God for the extension of the reign of Jesus Christ in a country so distant and likewise so foreign and among a nation entirely without knowledge of the true God.[\[26\]](#)

Sadly, the mission was not successful because the leader of the group betrayed the Protestants. Some were killed, and others were sent back to Europe. Though the mission failed, it remains "a striking testimony to the far reaching missionary vision of Calvin and his Genevan colleagues."[\[27\]](#)

Conclusion

Though evangelism was not discussed as much in the sixteenth century as it would be later, Calvin proved himself to be genuinely concerned for the spread of the true gospel. In light of the situation of the world around him, his mission activity, and that of his colleagues, is truly admirable. His writings also show that he believed the gospel should be preached to all. The missionary endeavors of the Genevan church especially prove Calvin's commitment to missions. Speaking of these efforts, Philip Hughes states,

Here is irrefutable proof of the falsity of the too common conclusion that Calvinism is incompatible with evangelism and spells death to all missionary enterprise.[\[28\]](#)

Clearly, Calvin must have believed his teachings were compatible with mission work since he was so involved in such work himself. Whether or not one agrees with all of Calvin's views or actions, one must admit the great reformer's teachings (including predestination) do indeed support evangelism and mission work.

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⁴ Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Pelican Books, 1964; reprint, New York: Penguin Group, Penguin Books, 1990), vol. 3, *The Penguin History of the Church*, ed., Owen Chadwick, 83.

⁵ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke and Co., Limited, 1961), 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁷ R. Pierce Beaver, "The Genevan Mission to Brazil," in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed., J. H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Ephesians - Jude* (Wilmington, DE: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.), 2172.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2173.

¹² John Calvin, *Calvin: Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), vol. 23, *The Library of Christian Classics*, eds. Baillie, McNeill, and Van Dusen, 402.

¹³ Calvin, *Ephesians - Jude*, 2247.

¹⁴ Frank A. James, III, "Calvin and Missions," *Christian History*, 5 no. 4 (Fall 1986) : 23.

¹⁵ Hughes, "John Calvin: D. O. M.," 45.

¹⁶ Philip Hughes, ed. and trans., *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1966), 25.

¹⁷ Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin, a Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford; Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 182. Cf. Hughes, *Register*, 308.

¹⁸ Hughes, *Register*, 308.

¹⁹ Robert M. Kingdon, "Calvinist Religious Aggression," in *The French Wars of Religion, How Important Were Religious Factors?*, ed. J. H. M. Salmon (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1967), 6.

²⁰ Hughes, "John Calvin: D. O. M.," 46; cf. also McGrath, 184. McGrath mentions some of the areas to which these men went: Poitiers, Paris, Lyons, Bergerac, Dieppe (which he calls an important jumping-off point for England and Scotland, Issoudun, and Orleans.)

21 Ibid.

22 Anderson, 23.

23 Hughes, *Register*, 27.

24 Ibid., 317.

25 Hughes, "John Calvin: D. O. M.," 47.

26 Beaver, 61.

27 Anderson, 23.

28 Hughes, *Register*, 25.



- ¹ A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin, a Modern Interpretation* (Glasgow: Maclehose, Jackson, and Company, 1920), 154.
- ² Philip E. Hughes, "John Calvin: Director of Missions," in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed., J. H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), 42.
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- ⁴ Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Pelican Books, 1964; reprint, New York: Penguin Group, Penguin Books, 1990), vol. 3, *The Penguin History of the Church*, ed., Owen Chadwick, 83.
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- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ⁷ R. Pierce Beaver, "The Genevan Mission to Brazil," in *The Heritage of John Calvin*, ed., J. H. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), 56.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.
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- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
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- ¹² John Calvin, *Calvin: Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), vol. 23, *The Library of Christian Classics*, eds. Baillie, McNeill, and Van Dusen, 402.
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- ¹⁷ Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin, a Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford; Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), 182. Cf. Hughes, *Register*, 308.

¹⁸ Hughes, *Register*, 308.

¹⁹ Robert M. Kingdon, "Calvinist Religious Aggression," in *The French Wars of Religion, How Important Were Religious Factors?*, ed. J. H. M. Salmon (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1967), 6.

²⁰ Hughes, "John Calvin: D. O. M.," 46; cf. also McGrath, 184. McGrath mentions some of the areas to which these men went: Poitiers, Paris, Lyons, Bergerac, Dieppe (which he calls an important jumping-off point for England and Scotland, Issoudun, and Orleans.)

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Anderson, 23.

²³ Hughes, *Register*, 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁵ Hughes, "John Calvin: D. O. M.," 47.

²⁶ Beaver, 61.

²⁷ Anderson, 23.

²⁸ Hughes, *Register*, 25.



News

Abandoning Altar Calls

"Fewer people are walking the aisles of some of Southern Baptists' leading churches. And the pastors couldn't be happier about it." So begins an article entitled, "Alternative altar calls offer repenters options," released by the Associated Baptist Press on April 30, 1998. The practice of calling people to walk to the front of the congregation at the end of the sermon is equated with evangelism in the minds of many evangelicals and Southern Baptists. Failure to issue such a call for physical response has been cited as conclusive evidence that a preacher is not evangelistic. Now we learn that a growing number of mega-church pastors are abandoning or modifying the practice. Several pastors are interviewed in the article. The reasons they give for their shift in practice tend to be primarily pragmatic and psychological. "'There are people like me who don't like to walk forward in front of people,' said Frank Pollard, pastor of First Baptist Church in Jackson, Miss....'A lot of people by their natures don't feel comfortable coming down before a large group,' echoed [Steve] Stroope," pastor of Lake Pointe Baptist Church in Rockwall, TX. One of the pastors, however, addressed the practice theologically. Bob Roberts, of Northwood Church in North Richland Hills, TX, is quoted as saying, "In the past, the invitation was designed to 'get 'em down the aisle.' But we have to come to grips with the fact that God does the saving." Interestingly, all of the pastors agree that, whereas Southern Baptists have commonly held that "walking the aisle" is equivalent to making a public profession of faith, biblically, baptism is the public profession. As Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lake Forest, CA, notes, "the altar call is actually a modern invention." Despite that fact, historian Bill Leonard, states that, "Over time, the invitation has created the 'sacrament of walking the aisle'--an outward sign of an inward act." Perhaps this new trend will provoke a fresh study of God's Word on the matter.

Reformed Baptist Studies

The Association of Reformed Baptists Churches in America has announced the opening of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies in Escondido, CA. The Institute will be housed in Westminster Seminary. Dr. Jim Renihan has been named the founding Dean. Classes will begin in the Fall of 1998. Two classes to be offered in the first semester will be Distinctives of Reformed Baptist Theology and Reformed Baptist Pastoral Ministry. Inquiries should be directed to IRBS, Dr. Jim Renihan, P.O. Box 300771, Escondido, CA 92030-0771.

Lollars Commissioned by North American Mission Board, SBC

The first joint commissioning service between the newly formed North American Mission Board and a reorganized International Mission Board was held April 30th in Somerset, New Jersey. Among nearly 100 missionaries, Bill and Sheri Lollar were commissioned following their February appointment to serve in the Florida Panhandle. Bill has been the Graphic Design Editor for the Founders Journal for the past four and a half years, while planting a new church (Grace Heritage Baptist) in the Pensacola area. Previously, he planted churches in Nebraska and Michigan. He joined the Church Planting Department of the Florida Baptist Convention on February 1, 1998, as a jointly-funded field missionary with NAMB. Sheri received her appointment as a Church and Home missionary, staying busy with four children and serving as Bill's administrative assistant.

Working with thirteen Baptist associations from Pensacola to Tallahassee, Lollar works with each Director of Missions to discover strategic locations where new churches can be established for the glory of God. He also seeks to develop partnerships with established churches to share people, equipment, finances, and prayer support for the initial start-up of mission churches. As a mentor to each church planter, meeting monthly to provide fellowship,

encouragement, training, and accountability, Lollar spends about forty percent of his time traveling the fifteen-county-wide territory. In spite of the large territory, he rarely spends the night away from home. He remarks, "It's a great opportunity, after all these years of planting churches, to share my experience with other mission pastors. They seem to enjoy having someone available who has been there, who can challenge them to be faithful ministers of the gospel in the midst of sometimes very difficult and lonely circumstances."

Sharing a bit of his passion for new churches, Lollar adds, "I think we should get busy planting new churches! It's much easier planting new churches than reforming those who don't want reformation. With the fresh winds blowing across the landscape of Southern Baptist life, we need our best men to step forward and put their hands to the plow." He suggests that churches and pastors committed to the doctrines of grace ought to lead the way in establishing hundreds, if not thousands, of new churches across the United States. "Shall we just say we're committed to missions and evangelism, or will our labors and sacrifices resemble the spirit of the church at Antioch?" Lollar asks. "Our Arminian brethren wait expectantly, and rightly so, to see if we bear any real likeness to Carey, Rice, Taylor, and Judson. May God grant that we do!"

Inquiries about church planting in Florida may be directed to Bill Lollar 7606 Harvey Street, Pensacola, FL 32506. E-mail: BillLollar@aol.com or phone: (850) 455-1969.



Polemic Theology: How to Deal with Those Who Differ from Us

Roger R. Nicole

Introduction

It seems strange that one should desire to speak at all about Polemic Theology since we are now in an age when folks are more interested in ecumenism and irenics than in polemics. Furthermore, Polemic Theology appears to have been often rather ineffective. Christians have not managed in many cases to win over their opponents. They have shown themselves to be ornery; they have bypassed some fairly important prescriptions of Scripture; and in the end, they have not convinced very many people--sometimes not even themselves! Under these circumstances one perhaps might desire to bypass a subject like this altogether.

We are called upon by the Lord to contend earnestly for the faith (Jude 3). That does not necessarily involve being contentious; but it involves avoiding compromise, standing forth for what we believe, standing forth for the truth of God--without welching at any particular moment. Thus we are bound to meet, at various points and on various levels, people with whom we disagree. We disagree in some areas of Christian doctrine. We disagree as to some details of church administration. We disagree as to the way in which certain tasks of the church should be pursued.

If we are careful to observe the principles that I would like to expound in this article, we may find that they are valuable not only in the religious field but also in the realms of politics, business and family. Who does not encounter from time to time people who are not in complete agreement? Whether it is between husbands and wives, parents and children, co-workers on the job or fellow members in the church, it is impossible to live without disagreement. Therefore it is good to seek to discover certain basic principles whereby we may relate to those who differ from us.

There are three major questions that we must ask; and I would like to emphasize very strongly that, in my judgment, we need to ask them precisely in the right order: (1) What do I *owe* the person who differs from me? (2) What can I *learn* from the person who differs from me? (3) How can I *cope* with the person who differs from me?

What Do I Owe to the Person Who Differs From Me?

Many people overlook the first two questions and jump right away to: "How can I cope with this? How can I bash this person right down into the ground in order to annihilate objections and differences?" Obviously, if we jump to the third question from the start, it is not likely that we will be successful in winning over dissenters. So I suggest, first of all, that we need to face squarely the matter of our duties. *We have obligations to people who differ from us.* This does not involve agreeing with them. We have an obligation to the truth, and that has priority over agreement with any particular person. If someone is not in the truth, we have no right to agree. We have no right even to minimize the importance of the difference. Consequently, we owe them neither consent nor indifference. But what we owe that person who differs from us, whoever that may be, is what we owe every human being--*we owe them love.* And we owe it to them to deal with them as we ourselves would like to be dealt with or treated. (Matthew 7:12)

How then do we desire to be treated? First, we want people to know what we are saying or meaning. If we are going

to voice differences, therefore, we have an obligation to make a serious effort to understand the person with whom we differ. That person may have published books or articles. Then we should be acquainted with those writings. It is not appropriate for us to voice sharp differences if we have neglected to read what is available. The person with whom we differ should have evidence that we have read carefully what has been written and that we have attempted to understand its meaning. In the case of an oral exchange where we don't have any written words, we owe the person who differs from us the courtesy to listen carefully to what he or she says. Rather than preparing to pounce on that person the moment he or she stops talking, we should concentrate on apprehending precisely what his or her position is.

In this respect, Dr. Cornelius Van Til has given us a splendid example. As you may know, he expressed very strong objections to the theology of Karl Barth. This was so strong that Barth claimed that Van Til simply did not understand him. It has been my privilege to be at Dr. Van Til's office and to see with my own eyes the bulky tomes of Barth's, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (incidentally, these volumes were the original German text, not an English translation). As I leafed through them I did not see one page that was not constellated with underlining, double-underlining, marginal annotations, exclamation points, and question marks galore. So here is someone who certainly did not say, "I know Karl Barth well; I understand his stance; I don't need to read any more of this; I can move on with what I have." Each of the volumes, including the most recent, gave evidence of very, very careful scrutiny. So when we take issue with somebody, we need to do the job that is necessary to know that person so that we are not voicing our criticism in the absence of knowledge but that we are proceeding from the vantage point of real acquaintance.

Even that is not enough, however. Beyond what a person says or writes, we must *attempt to understand what a person means*. Now it is true that there are what are called "Freudian slips." That is, there are people who do not express themselves exactly in the way it should be done and in the process somehow they give an insight into a tendency that is in them all along and which leads them to express themselves in an infelicitous but revealing manner. So it is appropriate, I suppose, to note this as a personal footnote, so to speak, in order possibly to make use of it at some time in the discussion. But if somebody fails to express himself or herself accurately, there is no great point in pressing the very language that is used. We ought to try to understand what is the meaning that this language is intended to convey. In some cases, we may provide an opportunity for an opponent to speak more accurately.

I have experienced this in my own home. I have noticed that my wife sometimes says things like, "You never empty the wastebasket." Now as a matter of fact, on January 12, 1994, I did empty the wastebasket. Therefore, the word *never* is inappropriate! This tends to weaken the force of my wife's reproach. Well, I've learned that I don't get anywhere by pressing this point. This kind of response does not provide dividends of joy and peace in my home. I've learned, therefore, to interpret that when my wife says "never" she often means "rarely" or "not as often as should be." When she says "always," she means "frequently" or "more often than should be."

Instead of quibbling as to the words *never* and *always*, I would do well to pay attention to what she finds objectionable. And indeed, I should be emptying the wastebasket. Feminist or not feminist, a husband and father should empty the wastebasket; and therefore, if I fail to do this, even only once, there is a good reason to complain. Nothing is gained by quibbling about how often this happens. I ought to recognize this and be more diligent with it rather than to quote the dictionary.

Similarly, in dealing with those who differ, we ought not to split hairs about language just in order to pounce on our opponent because he or she has not used accurate wording. It is more effective to seek to apprehend what is meant and then to relate ourselves to the person's meaning. If we don't do that, of course, there is no encounter because this person speaks at one level and we are taking the language at another level. The two do not meet and the result is bound to be frustrating. If we really want to meet, we might as well try to figure out the meaning rather than to

quibble on wording.

Moreover, I would suggest that we owe to people who differ from us to *seek to understand their aims*. What is it that they are looking for? What is it that makes them tick? What is it that they are recoiling against? What are the experiences, perhaps tragic experiences, that have steeled them into a particular stance? What are the things that they fear and the things that they yearn for? Is there not something that I fear as well or yearn for in the same way? Is there not a possibility here to find a point of contact at the very start rather than to move on with an entirely defensive or hostile mood?

As an example it may be observed that in the fourth century the heretic Arius, and undoubtedly many of his supporters, were especially leery of modalism, a serious error in the conception of the Trinity which claims that the Godhead manifested Himself in three successive forms or modes as Father, Son and the Holy Spirit rather than to exist eternally as Three Who have interpersonal relations with each other. From Arius' vantage point, the orthodox doctrine of the full deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit did of necessity imply a modalistic view. It did not help that one of his very vocal opponents, Marcellus of Ancyra, did, in fact, border dangerously on modalism. Arguments designed to show the biblical and logical strengths of the doctrine of the Son's full deity or vice versa the weakness of Arius's subordinationism would not be likely to be effective unless the instinctive fear of an implied modalism were addressed and shown to be without solid foundation. With all due respect to the soundness, courage, and perseverance of those like Athanasius and Hilary who consistently resisted Arianism, one may yet wonder if a more effective method of dealing with this error might not have been to allay the fear that orthodoxy inevitably would lead to modalism.

In the controversy between Calvinism and Arminianism, it must be understood that many Arminians (possibly almost all of them) believed that to affirm the complete sovereignty of God inevitably implies a rejection of any free will, power of decision, and even responsibility on the part of created rational beings, angelic or human. Their attachment to those features naturally leads them to oppose Calvinism as they understand it. It is imperative for the Calvinist controversialist to affirm and to prove that he does not, in fact, deny or reject these modalities of the actions and decisions of moral agents but that he or she undertakes to retain these--even though their logical relation to divine sovereignty remains shrouded in a mystery that transcends finite, human logic.

Similarly, the Calvinist should not glibly conclude that evangelical Arminians are abandoning the notion of divine sovereignty because they assert the freedom of the human will. It is plainly obvious that Arminians pray for the conversion of those yet unconverted and that they desire to recognize the Lordship of God. The Arminian will do well to emphasize this in discussion with Calvinists so as to provide a clearer perception of the actual stance of both parties. It is remarkable that committed Calvinists can sing without reservation many of the hymns of Charles and John Wesley, and vice versa that most Arminians do not feel they need to object to those of Isaac Watts, Augustus Toplady, or John Newton.

In summary, I would say we owe it to our opponents to deal with them in such a way that they may sense that we have a real interest in them as persons, that we are not simply trying to win an argument or show how smart we are, but that we are deeply interested in them--and are eager to learn from them as well as to help them.

One method that I have found helpful in making sure that I have dealt fairly with a position that I could not espouse was to assume that a person endorsing that view was present in my audience (or was reading what I had written). Then my aim is to represent the view faithfully and fully without mingling the criticism with factual statements. In fact, I try to represent them so faithfully and fully that an adherent to that position might comment, "This man certainly does understand our view!" It would be a special boon if one could say, "I never heard it stated better!" Thus I have earned the right to criticize. But before I proceed to do this, it is only proper that I should have

demonstrated that I have a correct understanding of the position I desire to contest.

What Can I Learn from Those Who Differ From Me?

To raise the question, "What do I *owe* the person who differs from me?" is very important, for otherwise any discussion is doomed to remain unproductive. The truth that I believe I have grasped must be presented in a spirit of love and winsomeness. To do otherwise is to do detriment to truth itself, for it is more naturally allied to love than to hostility. (Eph. 4:15) Belligerence or sarcasm may, in fact, reflect a certain insecurity that is not warranted when one is really under the sway of truth. It may well be that God's servant may be moved to righteous indignation in the presence of those "who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom. 1:18). This explains the outbursts of the Old Testament prophets, of our Lord in His denunciation of the Pharisees, and of the apostles in dealing with various heresies and hypocrisies in the early church. These severe judgments were ordinarily aimed at warning members of the flock rather than winning over some people who had distanced themselves from the truth of God to a point which left no room for the hope of recovery (Ps. 139:19-22; Isa. 5:8-25; Dan. 5:26-30; Matt. 12:30-32; Acts 7:51-53; Gal. 5:12; Rev. 22:15). But when dealing with those we have a desire to influence for the good, we need imperatively to remain outgoing and gracious.

When we are sure that our *outward* approach is proper, we need secondly to safeguard the *inward* benefits of courtesy. We need to ask the question, "What can I *learn* from those who differ from me?" It is not censurable selfishness to seek to gain maximum benefits from any situation that we encounter. It is truly a pity if we fail to take advantage of opportunities to learn and develop that almost any controversy affords us.

Could I be Wrong?

The first thing that I should be prepared to learn is that I may be wrong and the other person may be right. Obviously, this does not apply to certain basic truths of the faith like the Deity of Christ or salvation by grace. The whole structure of the Christian faith is at stake here, and it would be instability rather than broad-mindedness to allow these to be eroded by doubts. Yet, apart from issues where God Himself has spoken so that doubt and hesitancy are really not permissible, there are numerous areas where we are temperamentally inclined to be very assertive and in which we can quite possibly be in error. When we are unwilling to acknowledge our fallibility, we reveal that we are more interested in winning a discussion and safeguarding our reputation than in the discovery and triumph of truth. A person who corrects our misapprehensions is truly our helper rather than our adversary, and we should be grateful for this service rather than resentful of the correction. As far as our reputation is concerned, we should seek to be known for an unflinching attachment to the truth and not appear to pretend to a kind of infallibility that we are ready to criticize when Roman Catholics claim it for their popes!

Our reputation will be better served if we show ourselves ready to be corrected when in error, rather than if we keep obstinately to our viewpoint when the evidence shows it to be wrong. I should welcome correction. It renders a signal service to me! I should respond, "I was mistaken in this; I am glad that you straightened me out; thank you for your help." People who are unwilling to acknowledge their mistakes, by contrast, may be called stubborn and lose their credibility.

What are the Facts?

In the second place we may learn from one who differs that our presentation, while correct as far as it goes, fails to embody the truth in its entirety on the subject in view. Although what we assert is true, there are elements of truth that, in our own clumsy way, we have overlooked. For instance, we may be so concerned to assert the deity of Christ

that we may appear to leave no room for His humanity. As a Calvinist, I may so stress the sovereignty of God that the reality of human decision may appear to be ruled out. Here again, I should feel grateful rather than resentful. The adversative situation may well force me to give better attention to the fullness of revelation and preclude an innate one-sidedness which results in a caricature that does disservice to truth no less than an actual error may do.

Many of the mainline elements of Christianity are thus, "two-railed," if I may express myself in a metaphor. Unity, yet threeness in God, immanence yet transcendence, sovereignty of God and yet reality of rational decision, body and soul, deity and humanity of the Mediator, justification and sanctification, divine inspiration of Scripture and human authorship, individual and corporate responsibility. One could multiply the examples. When one of the factors is overlooked, one is doing no better than the railroad operator who would attempt to run an ordinary train with only one rail (I do not speak here of monorails!). The person who differs from me may render me great service by compelling me to present the truth in its completeness and thus avoid pitfalls created by under-emphasis, over-emphasis and omissions. Thus my account will be "full-orbed" rather than "half-baked!"

What are the Dangers?

I may learn from those who differ from me that I have not sufficiently perceived certain dangers to which my view is exposed and against which I need to be especially on guard. I may find out notably that there are certain weighty objections to which I had not given sufficient attention heretofore. Here again, I must be grateful for a signal service rendered by the objector. Instead of being irked by the opposition, I should rise to the challenge of presenting my view with appropriate safeguards and in such a way as to anticipate objections that are likely to arise. For example, consider how the Westminster divines were led to express the doctrine of divine decrees (Confession 3, 1).

God from all eternity did, by the most wise and Holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

The three clauses following "yet so as thereby" are specifically designed to ward off misunderstanding and to meet objections commonly raised by Arminians or Arminianizing divines. The peculiar wisdom of setting up these safeguards in the first article of that chapter is the fruit of the bitter experiences made in more than half a century of controversy issuing in rich, balanced and nuanced expression of truth in the Westminster standards.

In France, certain barriers placed on bridges, terraces or quays are called "*garde-fous*", that is to say "safeguards for the crazy." They provide a fence to prevent those who are careless from falling off the edge. Those who disagree with us provide us with an opportunity to ascertain areas of danger in our view and to build "*garde-fous*" there. It would be a pity if we failed to take advantage of such an opportunity.

What about Ambiguities?

We may learn from those who object that we are not communicating as we should and that they have not rightly understood what we wanted to say. In this we can be benefited also, for the whole purpose of speaking (or writing) is to communicate. If we don't communicate, we might as well remain silent. And if we don't manage to communicate properly what we think, we have to learn to speak better. If ambiguities remain, and it is apparent from the way in which the other person reacts that ambiguities do remain, then we are challenged to make a presentation that is clearer, more complete, more wholesome, and one that will communicate better.

We have biblical precedent for this. The apostle Paul, for instance, anticipated objections which arise from misunderstanding of his doctrine. In Rom. 6:1 he writes "What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" This objection provides a launching pad to articulate more fully his thoughts so that readers will not be permitted to wander away, but will gain a proper understanding of the truth. There are many other examples of this approach in the Pauline writings. (Rom. 3:3; 6:15, 19; 7:7, 13; Gal. 2:17, 19 etc.) Even our Lord took pains to rephrase or amplify some of His statements that the hearer had not rightly understood at first (Matt. 13:18-23, 37-43; John 11:12-14, etc.).

The effort made to clarify our thought for others will often result in clarifying it also for ourselves. We may thus secure a firmer hold upon the truth, a better grasp of its implications, and relationship to other truths, a more effective way to articulate and illustrate it. These are boons for which we may be grateful to those who differ from us.

When we give due attention to what we owe those who differ and what we can learn from them, we may be less inclined to proceed in a hostile manner. Our hand will not so readily contract into a boxing fist, but will be extended as an instrument of friendship and help; our feet will not be used to bludgeon another, but will bring us closer to those who stand afar; our tongue will not lash out in bitterness and sarcasm, but will speak words of wisdom, grace and healing (Prov. 10:20, 21; 13:14; 15:1; 24:26; 25:11; James 3).

How Can I Cope with Those Who Differ from Me?

In the previous two sections, we sought to explore how to derive the maximum benefit from controversy both as to those who differ by being sure that we do not fail in our duty toward them, and as to ourselves in welcoming an opportunity to learn as well as an occasion to vindicate our position. Now after having given due attention to the questions, "What do I owe?" and "What can I learn?", it is certainly proper to raise the query, *"How can I cope with those who differ from me?"*

Now "coping" involves naturally two aspects known as "defensive" and "offensive." Unfortunately, these terms are borrowed from the military vocabulary and tend to reflect a pugnacious attitude which injects bitterness into controversies. We should make a conscious effort to resist that trend. Furthermore "offensive" is often understood as meaning "giving offense" or "repulsive" rather than simply "passing to the attack." It may therefore be better to use the adjectives "protective" and "constructive" to characterize these two approaches.

Biblical Arguments

In evangelical circles biblical arguments carry maximum weight if properly handled, for they invoke the authority of God Himself in support of a position. This is what Luther so eloquently asserted at the Diet of Worms, and what the Westminster Confession also bears witness to in these words:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any way contrary to His Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship (WCF 20, 2).

We need here to be careful to make a reverent use of Scripture, quoting every reference in a way that is consistent with its context. This will protect our approach against the legitimate criticisms levied against "prooftexting," a method that lifts scriptural statements from their environment, and marshals them as if they were isolated pronouncements vested with divine authority without regard to the way in which they are introduced in Holy Writ. A

notable example of this wrong approach would be to claim that God sanctions the statement, "There is no God" because it is found in Ps. 14:1 and 53:1.

We must therefore be careful to use the Scripture in such a way that an examination of the context will strengthen, not weaken, the argument. Very few things are as damaging to a position as a claim to be grounded in the authority of God's Word, only to find that a more careful examination of the text in its context cancels out the support it was presumed to give. An argument of this type, like the house built on sand, "falls with a great crash" (Matt. 7:27).

Likewise, a well-advised person will be careful to avoid passages that "boomerang"--passages that are used as proof, but turn out to be more decisive against the view advanced. For example, some people quote Phil. 2:12, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" and forget that Paul continues, "For it is God who works in you to will and to act"

All this demands that we should know the Word of God. God entrusted the sacred Scriptures to His people in order that they may search it diligently (John 5:39) and make it the object of their daily meditation (Ps. 119). To be acquainted with the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) must be the aim not only of "professionals" like pastors and professors, but of everyone who wants to be known as a Christian. To be sound in the interpretation, correlation and application of the Scriptures is the way "to be approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed" (2 Tim. 2:15), and every child of God ought to aspire to that.

Protectively we may be aware of passages that are often quoted to invalidate a stance which we find scriptural. Sometimes we may anticipate this objection even before it is raised and be prepared to show how it does not undercut our view. If we have a particularly strong refutation, we may at times wait until the person who differs quotes the passage. In this way we may score the psychological advantage of destroying an argument thought valid. Even this however, must remain within the framework of "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

In some cases it may be possible to show that the interpretation which would see in a particular passage an objection to the scriptural truth we are undertaking to advocate is simply improper and indefensible because it sets this Scripture in conflict with its context, or at least with the larger context of the unity of divine revelation. In other cases it may be sufficient to show that there are one or several plausible alternative explanations of this text that do not precipitate the alleged conflict. Since we are obliged to seek the unity of the truth, a plausible interpretation that averts a conflict may well deserve preference.

To sum up, we must ever strive to take account of the fullness of biblical revelation to have the boldness to advance as far as it leads, and the restraint to stop in our speculations where the Bible ceases to provide guidance. Polemic Theology in this respect is simply biblical light focused in such a way as to assist those who appear yet caught in some darkness.

General Arguments

These arguments direct their appeal to something other than the actual text of Scripture, namely to logic, history and tradition. While the authority involved is not on the same level as the Bible, the Word of God, it has a bearing on the discussions and must be considered by those who wish to make a strong case.

Appeal to Reason

Human reason, especially when not guided by divine revelation, is apt to go astray either in being unduly influenced by prejudice (what we call "rationalizing") or when reason forgets its proper limits and attempts to apply to the infinite what is valid only for finite categories. Nevertheless, reason is a divine gift to humankind, indispensable to the process of receiving, applying and communicating revelation (cf. J. I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God*, pages 128-137). It is a part and parcel of God's image in humanity. To fly in the face of logic is to court self-destruction, for logic has a way to beat its own path in the process of history. Rational arguments may therefore be presented with propriety, and those advanced by people who differ from us must be addressed.

Constructively, it behooves me to show that my view is in keeping with the totality of revealed truth, with the structure of the Christian faith as an organism of truth. I will promote the acceptance of an individual tenet if I can show that it is inescapably related to some other element of the faith on which I and the one who differs from me have agreement. For instance, one who accepts the doctrine of the Trinity is pretty well bound to confess the deity of Christ and vice versa.

Specifically, it is in order to make plain the damaging or even disastrous effects that a departure from the position I advocate will logically entail. In doing this, I must carefully distinguish between the view that the other person actually espouses and the implication that I perceive as resulting from it. Failure to make this distinction has resulted in the ineffectiveness of much Polemic Theology. Christians have wasted a huge amount of ammunition in bombarding areas where their adversaries were not in fact located, but where it was thought they were logically bound to end up.

To struggle with a caricature is not a "big deal." And to knock down a straw man does not entitle one to the Distinguished Service Cross! To be sure, it is a part of the proper strategy to show those who differ that their view involves damaging implications that will be difficult to resist in the course of time, but one must remain aware that it is the present position rather than anticipated developments that must be dealt with.

Protectively, I need to face the objections that are raised against my view. Some of them are irrelevant because they are based on a misunderstanding of the issues. To deal with these will help me to clarify my position and to reassert it with proper safeguards against one-sidedness, exaggeration or misconceptions. For instance, I may show that definite atonement is not incompatible with a universal offer of salvation in Christ, even though the supporters of universal atonement frequently think it is. Other objections may be shown to be invalid because they apply to the view of those who differ as well as to mine. Still other objections may be recognized as peripheral, that is to say, difficulties that may or may not be resolved rather than considerations that invalidate a position otherwise established. For instance, some alleged contradictions between two passages of Scripture represent a difficulty for the doctrine of inerrancy rather than a discreditation of this otherwise well-established tenet of the faith. Obviously the most advantageous situation is found when an objection can be turned around to become a positive argument in favor of the view objected to. Jesus' treatment of the Old Testament Law in Matt. 5:21-42 is a case in point. It might appear to a superficial reader that in this text Jesus repudiates the authority of the Law, when in fact He confirms it and reinforces it by His spiritual interpretation.

Furthermore, it is sometimes effective to challenge a person who differs from us to articulate an alternative approach which we may then proceed to criticize. For instance, a person who denies the deity of Christ may well be pressed to give his or her answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). Any answer short of full deity may be shown as deeply unsatisfactory, as leading to some form of polytheism or as failing utterly to account for the facts of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It may be hoped that those who have unsatisfactory views may then leave the smoldering ruins of their system and take refuge in the solid edifice of the faith "once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

Appeal to History and Tradition

The course of history is a remarkable laboratory that permits us to observe the probable developments that issue from the holding of certain tenets. The decisions of councils or the pronouncements of confessions of faith are often geared to guard against erroneous opinions that God's people recognized as dangerous or even fatal to the faith. To neglect this avenue of knowledge is to risk repeating some mistakes of the past that an acquaintance with history might well have enabled us to avoid. The Christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries should protect us from the twin errors of Arianism and Apollinarianism, of Nestorianism and Monophysitism without our passing through the convulsions that the church of those days experienced. The Reformation of the sixteenth century, similarly, should shield us from repeating some of the mistakes of the Roman Catholic Church.

Constructively, it is proper for me to attempt to prove that I am in line with orthodoxy in general and specifically with statements of faith that have received wide acceptance or that are part of the subordinate standards of my church or of the church of the one who differs. This will be especially significant if the formulation was established for the purpose of warding off a position analogous to that of my opponent. Now all man-made statements are subject to revision and correction, but it appears *prima facie* impossible that a view that flatly contradicts the Nicene Creed or even the Westminster Standards should turn out to be right, while these revered creeds, tested as they were through centuries of Christian thinking, should be wrong.

Specifically, the position of the one who differs may so closely approximate a well-known heresy adjudged as heterodox that the course of history may provide a portrayal of what happens to those who entertain it. The disastrous course of Arianism, culminating as it did in the Moslem conquest of North Africa, may be an example. We need, however, to be careful to recognize the importance of weighing all operative factors rather than just some selected ones which seem to suit our purpose. The demise of Christianity in North Africa applied largely to Egypt where a monophysite tendency prevailed, as well as to the lands that had been conquered by the Vandals with their Arian commitment.

Those who would gloat over the increasing heterodoxy of the Arminian movement in the Netherlands should probably be somewhat sobered in thinking of the destiny of Calvinism in New England, which moved from high orthodoxy around 1650 to the rather massive Unitarian and Pelagian defection at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These remarks do not invalidate the value of the lessons of history, but merely admonish to caution in applying them.

Protectively, the course of action would parallel closely what was described above. Objections raised against our view may be shown to be counterproductive, because they support rather than undermine our view. They also may be judged irrelevant, because they fail to address our real position or because they burden equally the objector's view. Or they may simply be inconsequential, because they have only a peripheral bearing on the issues.

Christian's Goal

Perhaps the most important consideration for the Christian is to remain aware at all times of the goal to be achieved. It is the consistent perception of this goal that will give a basic orientation to the whole discussion: Are we attempting to win an argument in order to manifest our own superior knowledge and debating ability? Or are we seeking to win another person whom we perceive as enmeshed in error or inadequacy by exposing him or her to the truth and light that God has given to us?

If the former be true, it is not surprising if our efforts are vain: we should be like physicians who take care of patients

simply in order to accredit some pet theory. If the latter be true, we will naturally be winsome. This will increase our patience when the force of our arguments does not seem to have an immediate effect. This will challenge us anew to understand those who differ in order to present the arguments that are most likely to be persuasive to them. God has appointed all of us to be witnesses to the truth. (John 1:7; Acts 1:8) God is the one who can and will give efficacy to this witness. We should never underestimate His ability to deal even with those who appear most resistant. Who would have thought that Stephen could actually reach the heart and mind of anyone in the lynch mob that put him to death? But his great discourse was actually sowing goads in the very heart and conscience of Saul (Acts 26:14). Acts 7 shows that his argument was sealed by his Christ-like spirit in the face of this atrocious murder (Acts 7:59-60). His witness was used by God to win over perhaps the ablest of his adversaries, who was to be the great apostle Paul!

A Christian who carries on discussions with those who differ should not be subject to the psychology of the boxing ring where the contestants are bent upon demolishing one another. Rather "The Lord's servant must not quarrel: instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses . . ." (2 Tim. 2:24-26).



Book Review

The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology by Millard J. Erickson, (Baker, 1997), 157 pp.

Reviewed by [Mark Dever](#)

This brief volume would be a good read for any pastor. Millard Erickson, professor of theology at Truett and Western Seminaries, is best known for his *Christian Theology* of ten years ago. As the author of what was the first new American conservative evangelical systematic theology in years, Erickson came to be known widely. He has not, however, been associated much in the public mind with theological controversy, but rather with careful compilation and helpful organizing of fairly conservative evangelical thought. So much the more surprise and delight, then, that this volume should come from his pen. And so much the more weight should be given to his cautions to contemporary evangelicals.

Erickson raises cautions about the theology of the postconservatives (a designation similar to the political neo-conservatives who are known as post-liberals, a supposedly more enlightened conservatism because it has walked in the moccasins of the political system it now opposes). He specifically examines some of the writings of Bernard Ramm, Clark Pinnock, Stanley Grenz and James McClendon. The book is clearly organized with a chapter first which sets out something of the historical and theological context for the present discussion, followed by a chapter then focusing in on formal theological questions of task and method. The theological heart of the book are chapters three through five, in which the doctrines of Scripture, God and Salvation are, in turn, examined. Erickson then concludes with a chapter of slight prognostication, wondering how much longer postconservatism can in any sense be called evangelical. Erickson's tone throughout is not, as he puts it alarmist but rather a more measured alertist, (9). His concerns in some ways seem to be practically motivated, in that conservative churches grow and liberal ones do not. He notes the changes that have occurred in Protestant (and Roman Catholic) theology, with a particular focus on the history of evangelicalism. From beginning to end, the reader is helped by a judicious use of footnotes, neither the over-plentiful ones which leave only a few lines of text above enough citations to scare a doctoral student on the one hand, nor the irritating slight and contentless end-notes of so many Christian books today. If you want to know more about Erickson's comments, simply look through his footnotes for historical and theological understanding, and resources for further study.

One of the most admirable parts of Erickson's treatment is the way in which he concludes each chapter with an evaluative section. In these, Erickson first gives positive insights of the postconservatives in the area under consideration, and only then turns to expressing his more negative criticisms or concerns. The openness of this exercise lends credibility to his analysis.

For all his moderation of style, Erickson is not slow to criticize organizations by name. InterVarsity Press and Christianity Today both are identified as main outlets for the work of postconservative authors. Erickson is critical of the changes at Fuller in the 1960s, clearly suggesting that the faculty came to be composed of less orthodox individuals, (26). He sees evangelicals adopting what earlier Protestants and contemporary Roman Catholics have done, the practice of retaining a theological term and changing its content, (28). Rather like a sophisticated documentary at points, Erickson lets the postconservatives (such a long name, should we simply refer to them as the pcs?) say some truly amazing things in their own words. The Olson quotation on page 29 is provocative.

The chapter on "The Task and Method of Theology" is probably the least accessible and yet most incisive for summarizing Erickson's readings of the movement and its main theological proponents. The formal doctrine of

Scripture is considered in Chapter 3, with the Rogers and McKim controversy rehearsed, along with other twentieth-century contests over the nature of Scripture. The inductive approach of Wesleyan scholar Dewey Beegle is presented (sounding finally pretty compatible with a Roman Catholic understanding). Erickson uses Paul Jewett's *Man as Male and Female* as an example of early postconservative evangelical exegesis. George Ladd's shift in his view of Scripture is noted (on page 78). Throughout the volume, Clark Pinnock comes in for special consideration, though older theologians like Donald Bloesch are not excluded. Among all of these pc theologians, Erickson notes the Barthian prejudice against considering revelation propositional. Particularly helpful are the critical comments about Stanley Grenz's very popular mix of communitarianism and evangelicalism which, as Erickson rightly says, leaves no distinction between the source and the norm of theology, (86)--a problem evident in Grenz's more recent works, indicating a movement which may only be able to find its final development in the community of the Roman church.

In the chapter on the doctrine of God, Erickson looks at some of the most disturbing theological moves of the pc theologians. They are headed to a process, open view of God, in which His initiative is replaced by response, His omnipotence by selected inabilities. Erickson does an admirable job of revealing some simple missteps on the part of the open theologians, and the chapter concludes with fairly slight appreciations and heavy, accurate criticisms.

In the chapter on Salvation, Erickson considers the universalist/inclusivist/exclusivist debate. He rightly points out that there have long been evangelical inclusivists (those who think that though salvation only comes through the work of Christ, one may not need to be consciously believing in Christ in order to savingly benefit from His work). He mentions A. H. Strong and the late Sir Norman Anderson among them, along with Clark Pinnock and Dale Moody. The purely emotive of this aspect of theological discussion is evident, even in the language used. Once again, however, when it comes time for evaluation, Erickson, rightly, is much more critical than appreciative of the pcs.

In his concluding chapter, Erickson posits a continuing move on the part of these theologians to be even more thoroughly anthropocentric, even while they retain a more traditional devotion and piety. Some of this shift Erickson discerns as a normal cyclical move in theology (though his comparison of this with the economy on page 134 is strange). He notes that there are those, like Alister McGrath and Tom Oden who have come the other way. On the whole, however, the movement seems to be to narrative over propositional, to James McClendon rather than Carl Henry. On the whole, Erickson suggests that the pc movement is a relativizing one, like earlier liberalism, and that, unchecked, the same fate awaits it. There are little added carefulnesses which would have benefited the book.

On page 88, Erickson presents the classical view of God as one in which God is not affected by anything. That's not so much the case, however, as that God is not necessarily affected by anything. He can and did enter our story, and took on the effects of our sins, but He need not have done it. He is not (in a modern sense) impassive. But He has not been affected because He was constrained to, but only because He so chose to be. But such faults are few. And the overview given to the reader in the short compass of the book makes it well worth reading for the pastor who stares at the theology section of the local bookstore, uncertain of what positions the various authors represent. For such confused clerics, or puzzled pastors, Erickson's volume should be just what the doctor ordered. Read it and weep. Better yet, read it and pray and preach, and buy another copy for a young friend.



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