



TOPICS

- Abortion
- Adultery
- Anglicanism
- Art & Culture
- Atheism
- Bible
- Birth Control
- Books
- Childhood
- Church & Ministry
- Church history
- College & University
- Court decisions
- Death
- Divorce
- Economy & Work
- Education
- Embryos & Stem Cells
- Environment
- Ethics
- Euthanasia
- Evangelicalism
- Evolutionism
- Family
- Film
- Gambling
- Heaven and Hell
- History
- Homosexuality
- Islam
- Jesus & the Gospel
- Law & Justice
- Leadership
- Manhood
- Marriage
- Mormonism
- Obituaries
- Parental rights
- Pluralism
- Politics
- Population Control

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The Reformation of Doctrine and the Renewal of the Church: A Response to Dr. William R. Estep

Thursday, July 16, 2009

ONE OF THE MOST PROMISING SIGNS OF RENEWAL IN SOUTHERN BAPTIST life is the emergence of genuine theological discussion and historical interest. After decades marked by the absence of significant interest in many doctrines, Southern Baptists are awakening to historic doctrinal debates in a new key.

As if awakened from doctrinal amnesia, the denomination faces the promise of both renewal and reformation. In this process, we may recover our theological heritage even as we address our modern context of ministry.

Dr. William R. Estep, one of Southern Baptists' most distinguished historians, has recently directed attention to a resurgent Calvinism in Southern Baptist life. The "Calvinizing" of the Southern Baptist Convention, he fears, is a dangerous development.

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to Dr. Estep, and to present a very different understanding of what is at stake. Though vitriolic and harsh in tone, his article deserves a respectful and thoughtful response.

First, let me state at the onset that if Calvinism is accurately represented by Dr. Estep's treatment, I will have nothing to do with it. Nevertheless, few of Calvin's friends or enemies will recognize Calvinism as presented

in Dr. Estep's article.

Calvin and Calvinism

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., serves as president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary — the flagship school of the Southern Baptist Convention and one of the largest seminaries in the world. [Read more](#)



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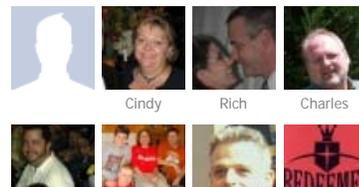


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Calvinism clearly draws its name from John Calvin, the sixteenth century Reformer whose towering intellect and biblical preaching gave birth to the “Reformed” tradition as one of the central streams of the Reformation. Calvin’s mission was to establish the Church on the basis of Scripture, with its doctrine and practice drawn from Scripture itself.

His *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, first published in 1536, was his effort to set forth the doctrines revealed in the Bible. Few works have come close to the *Institutes* in terms of influence in the Church. Elsewhere, Dr. Estep has described the *Institutes* as “one of Protestantism’s greatest attempts at erecting a systematic theology.” Calvinism is simply the Reformation tradition which is associated most closely with Calvin.

Dr. Estep presents a very severe portrait of Calvin the Reformer, and those looking for severity in Calvin need not look far. He was a sixteenth century man who bore many of the prejudices and political dispositions common to his day. He would not understand the notion of religious liberty, and he was ready to use the arm of the law to enforce correct doctrine.

No Calvinist I know would advocate Calvin’s position on these issues, any more than modern Lutherans would endorse Martin Luther’s anti-Semitism. Baptists who quickly reject Calvin’s theology because of his shortcomings on other issues must, if honest, reject virtually any influence from previous centuries. This holds true for Dr. Estep’s treasured Anabaptists as well.

Calvin is not fairly depicted in Dr. Estep’s article, but that is not the real issue. The issue is not Calvin, but the truth or falsehood of the doctrines he taught, and the doctrines now associated with his name.

The Heart of the Matter

The central tenet of Calvinism is the sovereignty of God. This is the starting point and the highest principle of Reformed theology. Calvinism is God-centered and draws its understanding of God directly from His self-revelation in Scripture. The God revealed in the Bible is the sovereign Creator, Ruler, and Redeemer. His omnipotence, omniscience, and governance over all things set this God of the Bible apart from all false gods.

The God of the Bible is the holy, ruling, limitless, acting, all-powerful God who makes nations to rise and to fall, who accomplishes His purposes, and who redeems His people. Arminianism—the theological system opposed to Calvinism—necessarily holds to a very different understanding of God, His power, and His government over all things.

Calvinism is most closely and accurately associated with the so-called “Doctrines of Grace,” which summarize the teaching of Scripture concerning the gospel. The Bible teaches us that we are born sinners, and are thus spiritually dead. Dead in our sins, we cannot on our own even respond to God’s grace. Thus, as Jesus told His disciples, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father” [John 6:65].

Further, the Bible makes clear that God has chosen a people “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” [I Peter 1:2]. Paul, in writing to the Ephesian church, states that the Father has chosen us in Christ

before the foundation of the world, and “predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ” [Ephesian 1:3-5]. The New Testament resounds with words including “chosen”, “election,” and “predestination.” The issue is not whether these are taught by Calvin, but whether they are taught in Scripture.

We would like to think that we are smart enough, spiritually sensitive enough, and responsive enough to chose to confess Christ without the prior work of God in our hearts. Unfortunately for our pride, this is not at all what the Bible reveals. God chooses us before we choose Him. As Southern Seminary president E. Y. Mullins stated, “God’s choice of a person is prior to that person’s choice of God, since God is infinite in wisdom and knowledge and will not make the success of the divine kingdom dependent on the contingent choices of people.”

Calvinism is nothing more and nothing less than the simple assertion that salvation is all of grace, from the beginning to the end. God saves sinners. Jesus Christ died for sinners. As Scripture promises, all those who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

The God of the Bible saves sinners, and holds those He has redeemed to the end. The vast majority of Southern Baptists hold to the doctrine known as the “Perseverance of the Saints,” but that precious promise makes sense only in terms of the doctrines of grace. Our choice of Christ is indeed necessary, but He has first chosen us—and He will keep us to the end.

Many Southern Baptists find predestination and other doctrines difficult to understand and even offensive to our pride. But we cannot read the New Testament without coming again and again to these doctrines.

Calvinism and Evangelism

Dr. Estep charges that a revival of Calvinism will lead to a lessening of evangelistic commitment and missionary vision. This is a common charge, but it is reckless and without foundation. Indeed, many of the most significant missionary and evangelistic movements in the history of the Church have been led by those who held to the very doctrines Dr. Estep laments.

These have included Charles Spurgeon, the greatest Baptist preacher of the last century, whose ministry at London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle was among the most evangelistic in the history of Christianity. Spurgeon openly and consistently advocated all of the distinctive doctrines of Calvinism, and publicly identified himself as a Calvinist. In a day of doctrinal decline, Spurgeon sounded the alarm for a recovery of biblical truth and the “doctrines of grace.” When asked how he reconciled his Calvinism and fervent evangelism, he responded: “I do not try to reconcile friends.”

Dr. Estep claims Andrew Fuller as an opponent of Calvinism, yet Fuller also held to the Doctrines of Grace. He clearly advocated the doctrine of election. In *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, cited by Dr. Estep, Fuller affirms that “none ever did or will believe in Christ but those who are chosen of God from eternity.”

William Carey, the “Father of Modern Missions,” was himself a Calvinist, as were leaders such as Jonathan Edwards and the great George White field. The Evangelism Explosion program used by so many Southern Baptist

churches was developed by a Calvinist.

If Calvinism is an enemy to missions and evangelism, it is an enemy to the Gospel itself. The Great Commission and the task of evangelism are assigned to every congregation and every believer. The charge that Calvinism is opposed to evangelism simply will not stick—it is a false argument. The Doctrines of Grace are nothing less than a statement of the Gospel itself. Through the substitutionary work of Christ, God saves sinners. The great promise is that whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Calvinism and the Southern Baptist Convention

Even the opponents of Calvinism must admit, if historically informed, that Calvinism is the theological tradition into which the Baptist movement was born. The same is true of the Southern Baptist Convention. The most influential Baptist churches, leaders, confessions of faith, and theologians of the founding era were Calvinistic.

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was born of this Calvinistic tradition, as reflected in its *Abstract of Principles*. James P. Boyce, in calling for the Seminary's founding, charged it to oppose all heresies, including Arminianism.

It was not until well into the twentieth century that any knowledgeable person could claim that Southern Baptists were anything but Calvinists. In referring to early Southern Baptists (especially James P. Boyce), Dr. Estep charges that they misunderstood Calvinism. This is a strange and innovative charge, considering that Boyce, for example, had been trained at Princeton Theological Seminary—the fountainhead of Calvinism in nineteenth-century America.

Boyce's colleague John A. Broadus—the greatest Baptist preacher of his day—was so certain that Calvinism was revealed in the Bible that he challenged those who sneer at Calvinism to “sneer at Mount Blanc.” Broadus was certain that the doctrines known as Calvinism were those preached by Paul and the other Apostles, and were revealed in Holy Scripture.

Other Southern Baptist leaders were also well-identified Calvinists. These included J. B. Gambrell and B. H. Carroll, the founder of Southwestern Seminary.

Calvinism was the mainstream tradition in the Southern Baptist Convention until the turn of the century. The rise of modern notions of individual liberty and the general spirit of the age have led to an accommodation of historic doctrines in some circles.

Dr. Estep is correct in noting the modifications to Calvinism which have occurred among Southern Baptists. Most Baptists hold to at least part of Calvinism, while generally unaware of the whole.

As Southern Baptists seek to recover our theological inheritance and the essence of biblical Christianity, I believe we will see a return to a more Calvinistic understanding of the gospel and a recognition of the absolute sovereignty of God.

Nevertheless, my main concern is not that Southern Baptists return to Calvinism—or to any human theological system. Our main concern must be to see Southern Baptists return to theological health and biblical fidelity. This theological and biblical reformation will, I am certain, also lead to a blazing recovery of missionary zeal and evangelistic fervor—and to the renewal of our churches and denomination. Southern Baptists will truly be headed for a well-deserved dunghill only when we retreat from biblical truth and withdraw from evangelism and missions.

We stand at an historic threshold. Now is the time for Southern Baptists to stand together on the great truths of God’s Word and on the front lines of God’s redemptive purpose. As Charles Spurgeon reminds us, we should rejoice whenever the Gospel is preached and shared—whether by a Calvinist or a non-Calvinist.

My personal agenda is not driven by Calvinism, but by the hope that Southern Baptists will embrace, confess, preach, and teach the truths of God’s Word—and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with every man, woman, and child on the earth. In this hope and vision we should all stand together.

As a dear friend has well stated, the real issue is not whether John Calvin is your personal theologian, but whether Jesus Christ is your personal Savior. By God’s grace, may we see genuine reformation and renewal in our churches—and a Great Commission vision in our hearts.

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Words From the Fire: Hearing the Voice of God in the 10 Commandments

BUY ON AMAZON

If God has spoken, then the highest human aspiration must be to hear what the Creator has said. God has indeed spoken, through the Ten Commandments, and Al Mohler explores this revelation of God and the implications for His people. The promise is to hear, to obey, and to live. These “Ten Words” tell us who God is and what His people should look like.

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Can Christian Organizations Remain Christian in a “Tolerant” Age?

Monday, March 22, 2010

Can a Christian organization remain Christian in a culture of postmodern “tolerance?” That question is the focus of a case soon to come before the U. S. Supreme Court.

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The Scandal of Gendercide — War on Baby Girls

Thursday, March 11, 2010

The reality has been known for years now, though the Western media have generally resisted any direct coverage of the horror. That changed this week when *The Economist* published its stunning cover story — “Gendercide — What Happened to 100 Million Baby Girls?”

Permanence Before Experience — The Wisdom of Marriage

Tuesday, March 2, 2010

Rightly understood, marriage is all about permanence. In a world of transitory experiences, events, and commitments, marriage is intransigent. It simply is what it is — a permanent commitment made by a man and a woman who commit themselves to live

Is the Reformation Over?

Friday, February 26, 2010

The Rev. Eric Bergman thinks he has seen the future — and it isn’t Protestant. Known as Father Bergman now, Rev. Bergman became a Catholic priest after serving for years as an Episcopalian minister. His conversion to Roman Catholicism came, he relates, after he began to ponder the moral and theological issues related to

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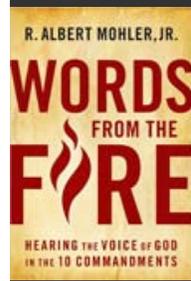
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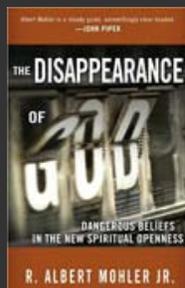
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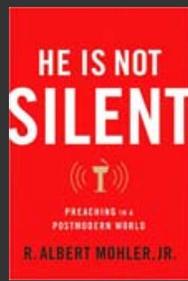
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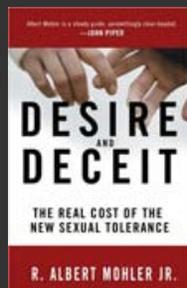
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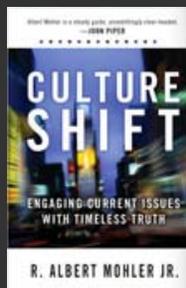
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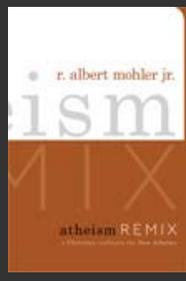
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THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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