

Founders Ministries Blog

Commentary and observations from Tom Ascol, Executive Director of Founders Ministries

THURSDAY, MAY 31, 2012

A Statement of Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation, Part 2

[Part 1 of this series]

SBC Voices has posted the text of "[A Statement of Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation](#)" on their site. In the next few posts, I want to interact with the document in hopes of fulfilling the spirit of our late brother, Roger Nicole's, admonitions on "[How to Deal with Those Who Differ with Us](#)."

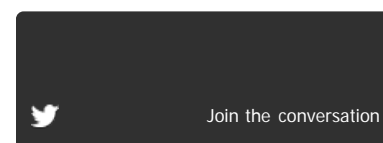
Though I am not ashamed to be known as a **Calvinist** by those who have an accurate historical and theological understanding of the term, it is not a badge I wear. Having held my theological convictions on this issue for over 30 years, I don't know how anyone could honestly call me a "new" Calvinist. I do have many young friends who could perhaps accurately be put into that camp, however. It grieves me to see them maligned and the doctrinal convictions which we share in common--and which we have repeatedly, publicly, historically and confessionally tried to articulate--misrepresented. Contrary to what the framers of this document assert, I hope that their judgments and views are far less representative of Southern Baptists than what they boldly assert.

At the outset I want to state plainly that, though I disagree not only with many of the theological expressions of this document but also what I see as several implied and stated misrepresentations, I am grateful for the clarity with which the authors have stated their views. For the most part, there is no difficulty understanding what they are affirming and denying. That is always helpful in theological dialogue. Furthermore, none of my critiques should be interpreted as suggesting that I think the originators of this document have no right to issue it or to argue strenuously--dare I say, aggressively--for their views. I am assuming that we are all mature enough to handle pointed, ruthlessly biblical debate. That does not mean "mean-spirited." It means doggedly determined to follow Scripture and to press each other to do so without apology.

I believe this document to be unwise. As I have stated previously, I think it has more potential to provoke serious division than anything else I have read on this issue coming from within the Southern Baptist camp. Given some of the debates and shenanigans that have gone on in the attacks and counter-attacks on Calvinism over the last ten years, that is a bold statement. However, I believe that the potential divisiveness might, by the grace of God, be negated and that the ensuing result could help clarify the attitudes and convictions of several key Southern Baptist leaders. Words have meaning and are a reflection, Jesus said, of what's in the heart. There is a spectrum of views on Calvinism within the SBC. At one extreme we have Calvinists who would be happy to run all non-Calvinists off (or at least relegate them to the arena of "being tolerated"). Their counterparts on the other extreme--the anti-Calvinists--have the same agenda but with their guns aimed, obviously, at the Calvinists.



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This document helps position its framers and signatories on this spectrum for all to see. That will ultimately prove to be helpful as Southern Baptists come to terms with the increasingly inescapable decision of how we will live together in the SBC. Will we demand complete uniformity on each of the doctrines clustered around salvation? Will we only tolerate those who disagree with us at any point? Or will we choose to walk together as those who agree with the [Baptist Faith and Message](#) without crossing our fingers?

Following is the first of a two-part response to the stated rationale for the document.

THE PREAMBLE (PART A)

The preamble to this document identifies the precipitating issue that has called it forth as "the rise of a movement called 'New Calvinism' among Southern Baptists." Though *TIME* Magazine popularized "New Calvinism" (NC) as one of the "[10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now](#)" in 2009, the framers of this statement infuse the term with their own prejudices by describing it as being characterized by "an aggressive insistence on the 'Doctrines of Grace' ('TULIP')." Of course, one man's aggression is simply another man's passion but the authors have been called to action by their perception that the NC movement is committed to two goals: 1) "advancing in the churches an exclusively Calvinistic understanding of salvation" and to 2) "making Calvinism the central Southern Baptist position on God's plan of salvation."

The first of these charges raises a question as to the signatories' attitude toward the autonomy of local Southern Baptist churches. If a church prayerfully and carefully calls a man to serve its membership as pastor, should those members not expect that pastor to "advance" his understanding of what the Bible teaches about salvation and to do so "exclusively?" I, for one, could hardly respect a man who did anything less, regardless of his theological convictions. If a Baptist church calls an Arminian to be its pastor then do we have any right to be alarmed if that man "advances an exclusively [Arminian] understanding of salvation?" Wouldn't the same be true if the church called a Molinist or Dispensationalist? We may lament and regret such a move, but should we be alarmed at a pastor and church for acting under the authority of Christ in advancing their understanding of Bible doctrine "exclusively?"

On the second charge, perhaps Hankins, Patterson, Vines, et al are privy to documents that spell out this agenda. If so, it would be enlightening to know exactly how the NC movement plans to proceed and furthermore, how will they know when they have achieved making their views the "central Southern Baptist position?" Once again, if the concern is that Calvinists want everyone to believe what they believe, then what alternative would the framers of this document propose for truth loving pastors of any theological stripe? Surely they would not advocate that anyone--Calvinist or not--hold their views on salvation with a "*que sera, sera*" attitude.

I do not know any Calvinist who has an agenda to make Calvinism "the central Southern Baptist understanding of salvation." It certainly is not my agenda. Although I would love for everyone to read Scripture the way that I do, I am content to live within the SBC under the doctrinal umbrella of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 and to cooperate with my less-Calvinistic brothers and sisters who are willing to do the same.

It seems that behind this second charge there must be some underlying concern that perhaps is not fully articulated in the preamble. I am speculating here and am willing to be corrected, but if the concern is that Calvinists are acting sinfully or unethically in trying to promote their views then let that be clearly stated. If there is a plot or conspiracy to make Calvinism "the central Southern Baptist position," then the authors would help us by making that known. Otherwise, their assertion of such is gratuitous and reveals that they are warring against a straw man of their own creation.

I will finish looking at the Preamble in my next post before evaluating the ten affirmations and denials.

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Posted by Tom at 5/31/2012 12:08:00 PM 

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10 comments:

jimandchris said...



Dear Tom,

I am really confused. How do these men completely reject the history of Southern Baptists? Having just completed Dr. Nettles class on Baptist Identity, what exactly do they do with this proof that shows Southern Baptists have been Calvinists from its inception? Do they not even read the material? Why do they reject it? It doesn't make sense to me. What are your thoughts, Tom?

12:49 PM, May 31, 2012

Prophet Among Them said...



Tom, Thank you for a gracious, accurate and considering the importance of this issue brief statement.

I have pleaded with you and others for years to create the forum in which these issues are vetted exegetically, not polemically. Perhaps the principle of Unintended Consequences will bring this into being. If we continue to lob verbal grenades on the issue without solid, accurate and irenic exegesis to support our claims we will forever be immersed in this pit of ambiguity and brokenness.

I for one will participate. History, Tradition, the BFMK2 all pall in insignificance unless what they say harmonizes with what the text says. The mantra of my life and ministry is and has been "What does the text say?" I pray that this will guide our deliberations through this maze of tragic theological fog heaped upon us by those with an unclear and unspecified articulation of their agenda. The statements they have offered make clear where they stand but what do they intend to accomplish by launching this balloon? I welcome the opportunity to walk through this as brothers with irenic grace but an uncompromised determination to bring clarity and resolution for the glory of Christ. Tom Fillinger, Columbia SC SouthEast Community Church and IgniteUS, Inc.

12:52 PM, May 31, 2012

Tom said...



JimandChris,

No one has even attempted a refutation of Tom Nettles' *By His Grace and For His Glory*--a book that argues that the theological consensus in the SBC was decidedly Calvinistic for the 75 years. A few folks have cited a couple of examples of 19th century Southern Baptists who were not Calvinists and think that such citations overthrow Nettles' thesis. It would be nice to see a serious engagement of his book, but, thus far, none has been forthcoming.

In short, it doesn't make sense to me, either.

1:24 PM, May 31, 2012

Tom said...



Tom,

I agree with you--Scripture and Scripture alone must be our final authority. If this gets us reexamining the text, we can all be grateful.

ta

1:30 PM, May 31, 2012

Bear Reed said...



One thought comes to mind reading "A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation": no one, not a single solitary person, is saved "by repentance & faith" ... referring to the action of the person in repentance & the expression by the person of faith.

Any who are saved are saved by the grace of God in expressing mercy to the damnable & in giving spiritual life to the spiritually dead. Salvation can be rightly said to be "by faith" in that Jesus Christ faithfully (by faith) was obedient to the Father & thereby accomplished the works necessary for the salvation of those the Father had given Him. Nothing less than this perfect faithfulness is sufficient for the salvation of any.

When God graciously sends the Holy Spirit to bring a person into spiritual life, at the proclamation of the Gospel there is that response in the person because of this spiritual life which is called "faith". Faith, in this framework, is the spiritual response which results in belief then trust then repentance.

Thus said, it is NOT our faith which saves, but our faith which is evidence of our salvation. It is not our repentance which saves, but our repentance which is evidence of our faith which is evidence of our salvation.

Those spiritually dead cannot respond to the Gospel with faith anymore than a rock can respond to the kisses of a maiden. The dead can imitate spiritual life because we are still encumbered by sin in the flesh & are deceived and deceiving in that fleshly nature. Looking like the living & being alive, however, are two VERY different things.

2:02 PM, May 31, 2012

Debbie Kaufman said...



This document may be a blessing in disguise. The author has written out a full statement of **all** beliefs held by those who would wish to exclude Calvinists.

Some of what they have written I do not believe even a majority of non-Calvinist Southern Baptists can agree with. This would go to your question Tom. Would they require total conformity to those beliefs? If so, we as a Convention may get mighty small in number.

2:25 PM, May 31, 2012

SQLSvrMan said...



Tom,

I find it very interesting that some of the signers talk about Spurgeon from time to time. I am always amused by that. They act like Spurgeon was not a Calvinist.

2:54 PM, May 31, 2012

Clark said...




Tom, I'm in my late 50s, I've been a reformed baptist 20 years. Am I a New Calvinist? I've attended numerous Founders events, read the occasional blog, and I have yet to hear any break-out sessions on "How to make the SBC Reformed." Nor a sermon on the subject, nor a coffee-chat on the subject! We state our beliefs cogently, they state theirs likewise, and we have dialogue. But in spite of Dr. Nettle's fine book, we never told the "Traditionalists" that we are the TRUE Traditionalists and they need to conform.

Or was I at home sick that day?

10:00 PM, May 31, 2012

Bill Sexton said...

 I attend a Southern Baptist church and the Calvinist view is confusing to me. I am not posting to argue or say anyone is wrong. I find it hard to reason that Jesus didn't die for all the world. A few questions I have are is God sovereign? Is God love? Is God the author of sin? If you believe God is sovereign, then I can only conclude He has the authority to save all. If He only chooses to save some and eternally damn others then He is not a God of love. For the Calvinist view on sin, then we have to say God is the author of sin, which again contradicts His written word. Adam and Eve was sinless until their horrendous free will choice damned all the world.. Then Jesus appears to die for "all the world". I then cannot reason why Jesus would have to die so the already saved could be saved. What is the point? Then to say we have no free will then we really do not glorify God if we don't freely worship Him. Furthermore, why pray, it is useless if we have no free will. We are puppets on a string! The Bible talks on many instances of false conversions which would dispute irresistible grace. If the rich young ruler had the choice to follow Jesus, and he didn't, then where does irresistible grace apply? He couldn't have been any closer to grace and mercy at that point. So why did he walk away? Free will or was Jesus just joking around with his eternity? Your view doesn't fit the puzzle for me. I write this with much love and concern with no finger pointing! God Bless and thanks for reading.

1:34 AM, June 06, 2012

Tom said...

 Bill,

Thanks for commenting and asking pointed, sincere questions. You raise very important points and ask more questions than I can adequately answer in a comment stream. Your questions are among those that thoughtful Christians have grappled with throughout the centuries. There are answers and I would be glad to try to provide some for you. If you will email me through the www.founders.org site, I will be glad to do what I can to help you understand my reading of the Bible on these points.

Blessings,
tom

8:20 AM, June 06, 2012

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