

The Founders Journal



Committed to historic Baptist principles

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**From the Protestant Reformation
to the Southern Baptist Convention**

CONTRIBUTORS:

Dr Tom Ascol is Pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, FL and author of the Founders Ministries Blog: wwwFOUNDERS.org/blog/

Earl Blackburn is Pastor of Heritage Baptist Church in Shreveport, LA.

Cover Photo: Monument of four Reformers (John Calvin, William Farel, Theodore Debeze and John Knox) at Reformers Wall in Geneva.

The Founders Journal



Editor: Thomas K. Ascol

Associate Editor: Tom J. Nettles

Design Editor: Kenneth A. Puls

Contributing Editors: Bill Ascol, Timothy George, Fred Malone, Joe Nesom, Phil Newton, Roger Nicole, Don Whitney, Hal Wynn

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Founders Journal • P.O. Box 150931 • Cape Coral, FL 33915

For those who have access to the InterNet or many commercial online computer services, you may send your correspondence to editor@FOUNDERS.org via electronic mail. Or you may contact us by phone at (239) 772-1400 or fax at (239) 772-1140.

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Editorial Introduction

Tom Ascol

In 1996 Founders Press was launched with the modest offering of a small booklet entitled, *From the Protestant Reformation to the Southern Baptist Convention: What Hath Geneva to Do with Nashville?* The purpose of the booklet was to help argue the historical point that Southern Baptists have much in common with other Protestant heirs of the Reformation. Specifically, the concern was to demonstrate that the doctrinal heritage of the SBC is firmly entrenched in that Reformed theology known as the “doctrines of grace.”

To most Baptists who have taken the time to investigate our denominational roots, that point seems hardly debatable today. Even the most strident opponents of the sovereignty of God’s grace in salvation (well, for the most part) now recognize that dimensions of Reformed theology influenced the origins of the SBC. Sometimes that influence is minimized to one of two or more “streams” that conflated to form the convention, but at least it is acknowledged.

The issue of Southern Baptist origins is not really of supreme importance. Far more significant than what was once believed is what the Bible actually says. But history does have some important lessons to teach us. Humility dictates that we consider the theological convictions of those on whose shoulders we stand. We owe them this because of their many labors that still benefit us today. We owe it to ourselves because if what they believed was true in their day, then it is still true in our day because God’s truth does not change.

From the Protestant Reformation uses a historical argument in order to make that theological point. What our forefathers believed and taught about the nature of God’s saving grace is worthy of our careful study. They were men committed to the authority and clarity of God’s Word just as strongly as we are today. They did exegesis and exposition just as we do. We should be willing to listen to them.

Perhaps they were wrong. If we become convinced of that then let’s be bold to state it plainly. If we are unwilling to make that conclusion, then let’s allow for the legitimacy of their doctrinal views and not fight against the growing recovery of them in our day.

In this issue of the *Founders Journal* we are reprinting an updated and expanded version of the original Founders Press booklet. The most notable revision is found in the new material that has been added to the section on Sandy Creek and the Separate Baptist tradition. In addition, the article by Earl Blackburn elaborates the “five solas” of the Reformation and shows their abiding significance for churches in every age.

Baptists have a rich theological heritage. Lessons from that heritage can serve us well as we chart a God-glorifying course for the future. ❶

News

Southern Baptist Founders Conference

Make plans now to attend the **2008 Southern Baptist Founders Conference**, June 24–27, hosted by Bethel Baptist Church in Owasso, OK. The theme will be *Lengthening the Cords and Strengthening the Stakes: Church Planting and Church Renewal*.

First Deep South Founders Conference

The first **Deep South Founders Conference** will be held January 10–12, 2008 at the Castlewoods Baptist Church in Brandon, MS. The theme will be *The Word of God* with keynote speaker David Miller. Additional speakers include: Cary Kimbrell, Isaac Makashinyi, Huey Moak, Joe Nesom and Todd Wilson.

For more information, see online:

<http://msfoundersfraternal.wordpress.com/>

Building Bridges

Join us November 26–28, 2007 for *Building Bridges: Southern Baptists and Calvinism*. The conference will be held at Ridgecrest Conference Center in North Carolina and is being sponsored by Founders Ministries and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In addition to scheduled worship times, subjects to be addressed during the conference are: The Historical Record; Calvinism: A Cause for Rejoicing, A Cause for Concern; The Atonement: Its Design, Nature, and Extent; Theological Stereotypes: Let's Be Fair and Honest with Each Other; Election and Calling: A Biblical/Theological Study; and Working Together to Make Christ Known.



For more information see online: www.foundersconference.org/

From the Protestant Reformation to the Southern Baptist Convention

What Hath Geneva to Do with Nashville?

Thomas K. Ascol

Sometimes Baptists live under the mistaken notion that they came into existence with little or no influence from any other evangelical group. Some even believe that Baptist churches have existed from the time of John “the Baptist” to the present. While the principles that Baptists hold dear originate in the Word of God and have been found in various degrees of purity throughout church history, our origin as a distinct group can be traced to the early seventeenth century.

Modern Baptists arose out of the spiritual impetus of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. We are a Reformational people. In many respects the seat of the Reformation in Europe was Geneva where John Calvin helped train countless pastors, missionaries and future martyrs to preach the gospel throughout the world. The Scottish Reformer, John Knox, called the academy established there “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on earth since the days of the Apostles.”¹

The Southern Baptist Convention came into existence in 1845. Over the years Nashville, Tennessee became home to the offices of the SBC Executive Committee as well as the Sunday School Board (now called LifeWay). Though local churches hold the final authority in our denominational polity, Nashville has become symbolic as the “headquarters” of what has become the largest missionary sending agency in the world.

As disjointed as the worlds of sixteenth-century Geneva and twentyfirst-century Nashville may appear, there is in reality a close and vital connection between them. The relationship becomes apparent when we trace some of the main features of the Southern Baptist family tree.

We Baptists look to the Scriptures to justify our existence, and that is just as it should be. We are a people of the Book. The Bible, and the Bible alone, is our authority. We look no further than the Scriptures to seek direction for our faith and practice. History is not our authority. Nevertheless, history can be our assistant as we learn from the biblical insights of those who have gone before us. In this day when it seems that an identity crisis is epidemic among Baptists, especially among

those known as Southern Baptists, wisdom dictates that we consider afresh our heritage and take note of how the Lord taught and guided our forefathers who were committed to the Baptist way in the face of great challenges and struggles.

The heritage of Southern Baptists is rich, and it stretches back hundreds of years before our actual formation as a denomination in 1845. Our roots extend all the way back to the fertile soil of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation.

From the Protestant Reformation to 1619

The nineteenth century Scottish theologian William Cunningham called the Protestant Reformation “the greatest event, or series of events, that has occurred since the close of the canon of Scripture.”² It was, quite simply, a great work of the Spirit of God, a revival of biblical Christianity. Without a doubt, the Reformation stands as the most significant revival since Apostolic times.

General Characteristics of the Reformation

Before an obscure monk named Martin Luther nailed ninety-five theses to the church door at Wittenburg on October 31, 1517, the church of Christ had been living in spiritually dark times. The Bible had been kept from the common people. The Roman Catholic Church had largely perverted the gospel of God’s grace by teaching that salvation comes from the hands of the priests through the administration of the sacraments in response to human works and merit.

With the dawning of the Reformation these perversions of the gospel were exposed, and a renewal of biblical Christianity emerged. Though the story of how this awakening came and spread across Europe and Great Britain is a fascinating one, we must limit ourselves in this article to an overview of what happened and leave the question of “how” it happened to a later study.

With the rediscovery of the Bible in the sixteenth century came a reawakening to God’s way of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ *alone*. In fact, that little word *alone* provides a real key to understanding the main themes of the Reformation. In Latin the word is *sola* and it was used in five phrases that capture the essence of Reformational theology.

Five Reformation Themes

1. *Sola Scriptura*: Scripture Alone

The Reformers taught that the Scripture alone is the final authority for what we must believe and how we must live. This view sounds commonplace to us today, but it was radical in the sixteenth century. For centuries the Roman Catholic Church had asserted its authority over against that of the Bible. The authority of the Pope, tradition and councils were all regarded as authorities along with the

Bible. Against that view, the Reformers asserted *sola Scriptura*: the Bible, and the Bible alone, is our only infallible source of authority for faith and practice.

2. *Sola Gratia*: Grace Alone

How can a sinful man become right with a holy God? That is always the most important religious question. It was the question that plagued Luther's conscience and nearly drove him insane before he was converted. Rome had developed a very elaborate system in response to that question. Rome's answer involved human works and merit—a sinner must perform sufficiently well before God if he would receive the blessing of salvation.

But through the study of the Scriptures the Reformers rediscovered that salvation is the gracious gift of God. Man contributes nothing to it. It is only by the sheer, absolute grace of God. Bible words like *election* and *predestination*, which magnify the grace of God in salvation, were rediscovered, having been largely forgotten or drained of their meaning by the mainstream of medieval Roman Catholic teachers.³

3. *Sola Fide*: Faith Alone

The Reformers taught that the means whereby a sinner is graciously justified before God is faith—not faith plus merit or faith plus works—but faith alone. Luther discovered that the Bible teaches that the sinner must place his trust in Jesus Christ in order to gain a right standing before God. Through faith alone the righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to the one who believes.

4. *Solo Christo*: Christ Alone

The Reformation rejected Rome's requirement that common church members put their faith implicitly in the church's teachings. Instead, they argued, Jesus Christ alone is the proper object of faith. *He* is to be trusted for salvation—not priests, popes, councils or traditions.

5. *Soli Deo Gloria*: The Glory of God Alone

In one sense the Reformation can be seen as a rediscovery of God—a reawakening to the greatness and grandeur of the God of the Bible. It is God, not man, who belongs at the center of our thoughts and view of the world. And it is God's glory alone that is to occupy first place in our motivations and desires as His children. He created us and the world for Himself, and He redeemed us for Himself. Our purpose is to glorify Him.

Certainly there are other truths that would need to be discussed in a thorough consideration of Reformation theology, but these themes summarize the essence

of Reformed thought. It is obvious that the Reformers did not invent these teachings. They simply rediscovered them in the Bible and brought them out into the light for all of God's people to experience. Baptists have been greatly influenced by these Reformed themes.

John Calvin

The most systematic exponent of Reformation theology was John Calvin, the Reformer of Geneva. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is a classic whose value is recognized by his followers and critics alike. Sadly, Calvin is more often vilified than read in our day. It has become quite fashionable among some Baptists to caricature his ministry and his teaching. He is often ignorantly portrayed as a harsh, prideful, sinister heretic-burner. For example, Joe Underwood, writing for *Baptists Today*, has erroneously charged that Calvin “ordered (and secured) the bloody, or fiery, execution of hundreds who disagreed with his doctrine and discipline.”⁴

It is true that one man, the Unitarian Michael Servetus, was executed in Geneva in 1553 because of his anti-Trinitarian views. That was a tragic event—one of many such tragedies that occurred well into the seventeenth century throughout Europe and England where church and state were joined together. While we can never justify the burning of heretics in the sixteenth century, neither can we overlook the harsh realities of that cultural context. Calvin was a man of his times.

But Calvin was also one of the most gifted expositors and systematizers of God's Word that the world has ever seen. From the Scriptures he argued that God is sovereign over every aspect of life—including man's salvation. Everything and everyone has come from God, was created for God, and will ultimately bring glory to God. Calvin clearly grasped and simply taught the depravity of the human race, which has left men without spiritual ability to come to Christ by their own power. He emphasized the glory of God in the grace of Jesus Christ that works to save sinners. Calvin expounded the biblical themes of election and predestination, showing them to be the unconditional blessings of God's sheer grace, which guarantee the salvation of helpless, lost sinners. He explained that the death of Jesus provided a definite atonement for sin, and that because of that death, sinners can be forgiven of sin and reconciled to God. Such reconciliation is effected, Calvin said, through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit when He effectually calls sinners to Christ through the proclamation of the gospel.

All of this is what is typically meant when someone speaks of “Calvinism” or “Reformed theology.” Neither term is usually employed as a reference to everything that Calvin or the other Reformers taught. Calvin's views on infant baptism, church-state relationship, church officers, and government are rejected outright by many who would nevertheless describe themselves as Calvinists. “Calvinism” is a worldview. It sees creation, history and salvation from a God-centered perspective. In particular, “Calvinism” is used primarily as a soteriological term. It is a

short-hand reference to those biblical doctrines that magnify the glory and grace of God in salvation.

Synod of Dort, 1618–19

This view, which sees God at the center of salvation, stands in stark contrast to the more man-centered view of Arminianism, which has become prevalent in our day. The difference between these two positions was made plain by the deliberations which took place at the Synod of Dort in 1618 and 1619.

Arminianism

When Calvin died in 1564, Jacob Arminius was four years old. He grew up to become a student of Theodore Beza, who was Calvin's successor at Geneva. In the course of preparing a defense of his teacher's view of predestination, Arminius became convinced of the opposing position. He went on to reject unconditional election and predestination and taught instead that God elects people based on His foreknowledge that they will exercise faith in Christ.

By the time he died in 1609, Arminius' views had been widely promulgated and debated throughout the Netherlands. The debate intensified the year after his death when his followers, called the Remonstrants, drew up five statements setting forth the views of Arminianism. Arminian theology was in essence a rationalizing of Calvinism. It attempted to remove the tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility by diminishing the significance of the former. The synod of the Dutch Reformed Church convened at the city of Dort in 1618 and 1619 to deal with the Remonstrant articles.

The five points of the Arminians may be summarized as follows:

1. God elects or does not elect on the basis of foreseen faith or unbelief.
2. Christ died for every man, although only believers are saved.
3. Man is not so corrupted by sin that he cannot savingly believe the gospel when it is put before him.⁵
4. God's saving grace may be resisted.
5. Those who are in Christ may or may not fall finally away.

Calvinism

After seven months and 154 sessions the synod rejected the Remonstrant articles (the five points of Arminianism) and published their view of the doctrines

that had been called into question. These Canons of Dort consist of fifty-nine articles with thirty-four additional paragraphs. They were published under five “heads of doctrine” (with the third and fourth being printed together) and have come to be known as the “five points” of Calvinism.

The so-called five points of Calvinism as they were expressed at Dort may be summarized as follows:

1. Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, He, out of mere grace and according to His sovereign good pleasure, chose certain persons to be redeemed by Christ.
2. The death of Christ is “of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world” (Article III). The saving efficacy of that death extends only to the elect because “it was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby he confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation and language all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to him by the Father” (Article VIII).
3. Though man was originally created upright, because of the Fall, “all men are conceived in sin, by nature children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and, without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God” (Article III).
4. Those whom God chose from eternity in Christ, He calls effectually in time and “confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of his own dear Son” (Article X). God does this by causing the gospel to be externally preached to them and powerfully illuminating their minds by His Holy Spirit, so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God. By the Spirit’s work of regeneration He pervades the inmost recesses of a man; He opens the closed heart and softens the hardened heart and infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens (Article XI).
5. Those whom God effectually calls do not totally fall from faith and grace. Though they may temporarily fall into backslidings, they will persevere to the end and be saved.

The order of these “contra-remonstrant” articles has been rearranged to facilitate the use of an acrostic as an aid to memory: T-U-L-I-P—Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace and Perseverance

of the Saints. This is what is meant by the five points of Calvinism, or, as they are sometimes called, “the doctrines of grace.” Once again, it is not accurate simply to reduce Calvinism to these five points. It is a way of viewing the world that stems from a clear vision of the sovereignty of God in creation, providence and salvation. These five points do clarify the Calvinistic understanding of the gospel, but they in no way say everything that Calvinism declares about salvation.

Hyper-Calvinism

It might be beneficial to distinguish Calvinism from hyper-Calvinism because the two are often confused.⁶ (Indeed some writers and teachers confuse them so often and so willingly that one must wonder if the practice is intentional.) In one sense, hyper-Calvinism, like Arminianism, is a rationalistic perversion of true Calvinism. Whereas Arminianism destroys the sovereignty of God, hyper-Calvinism destroys the responsibility of man. The irony is that both Arminianism and hyper-Calvinism start from the same, erroneous rationalistic presupposition: *Man’s ability and responsibility are coextensive*. That is, they must match up exactly or else it is irrational. If a man is to be held responsible for something, then he must have the ability to do it. On the other hand, if a man does not have the ability to perform it, he cannot be obligated to do it.

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

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

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

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

The Emergence of Modern Baptists in England

While the Calvinism-Arminianism debate was raging in Holland in the early seventeenth century, other forces were at work in England that ultimately resulted in the rise of modern Baptists.

In the last half of the sixteenth century the Puritan movement began to emerge in England. Though they did not all share the same ecclesiastical goal, Puritans, Separatists and Independents were all essentially English Calvinists. It is from this common source (perhaps with some influence from Continental Anabaptists) that the two streams of Baptists in England originated. One was Arminian and the other was Calvinistic.

General Baptists

The Baptist denomination began in the seventeenth century in England. A man named John Smyth, who had been brought up in the Calvinist-Puritan tradition, came to question a number of the ideas that he had been taught, especially infant baptism. After being exiled with his congregation to Holland, Smyth became convinced that he needed to be baptized as a believer. In January of 1609 Smyth poured water over himself and Thomas Helwys as an expression of believers' baptism. They then baptized the remainder of the congregation.

Smyth and his followers were strongly influenced by the Arminian view of salvation. They were called "General Baptists" because they held to a universal or general view of the atonement (i.e., that Jesus died for no one in particular but for everyone in general). Smyth did not remain a Baptist long. He soon joined the Mennonites. Helwys led the church back to England in 1611, where he was imprisoned for his views on religious liberty. This represents the first modern Baptist church on English soil.

The Arminian Baptists were unable to spread their principles very far. By 1626 there were only six General Baptist churches in England with a total membership of around 100. These churches eventually drifted from Arminianism into Unitarianism and actually died out in the next century. A "new connection" of General Baptist churches was organized in 1770 and, under the leadership of Dan Taylor, continued on into the nineteenth century.

Particular Baptists

The other group of Baptists to emerge in seventeenth century England went by the name of "Particular Baptists." Like their Arminian counterparts, their name reflects their theology, being a reference to their Calvinistic view of Christ's atonement as definite, or particular. That is, they believed that Jesus' death did not merely make salvation *possible* for everyone in general. Rather, they understood the Bible to teach that Jesus actually *paid* for the sins of His particular people—

His elect—when He died on the cross. These Particular or Calvinistic Baptists emerged during the 1630s when a Calvinistic Separatist church came to believe that baptism should be administered only to believers.

The Particular Baptists went on to affirm not only believers' baptism but believers' baptism by *immersion*. By 1641, at the latest, there existed a Baptist church which practiced baptism by immersion.

The Particular Baptists began to suffer under false accusations from their theological opponents. They were accused of being Pelagian in their view of sin and man, of being Anabaptists, of being General Baptists and of being anarchists. In order to declare openly their principles (with a special concern to distance themselves from the Anabaptists and General Baptists), the seven Particular Baptist churches of London decided to publish a confession of faith in 1644. As William Lumpkin has argued, "Perhaps no Confession of Faith has had so formative an influence on Baptist life as this one."⁷ It clarified the distinctive, Baptist view of the church while affirming the Reformed view of salvation.

This *First London Confession* served Baptists well until the latter part of the century, when Baptists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists began to suffer persecution under the harsh restrictions of the Clarendon Code adopted by Parliament. In an effort to show their substantial doctrinal unity with their fellow sufferers who were paedobaptistic, the Particular Baptists called for an assembly, which met in London in 1677 to draw up another confession of faith. It was modeled primarily on the *Westminster Confession* of the Presbyterians and, to a lesser degree, on the *Savoy Declaration* of the Congregationalists. Because of the political climate, this *Second London Confession* was not published openly until 1689 when it was issued with the endorsement of 107 Baptist churches across England and Wales.

While the General Baptists were degenerating into Unitarianism in the eighteenth century, the Particular Baptists began to decline through the parasitic influence of hyper-Calvinism. Though they remained orthodox in belief, many Particular Baptist churches became hardened by a fatalistic spirit. One hymn from this period⁸ exemplifies their attitude:

We are the Lord's elected few,
Let all the rest be damned.
There's room enough in hell for you,
We'll not have heaven crammed!

Fortunately, this hyper-Calvinism did not go unchecked. Ultimately it was challenged and overcome in the late eighteenth century by Andrew Fuller, William Carey, John Suttcliffe and others. These men and their colleagues rejected what they called "false Calvinism" and returned to the evangelical Calvinism (what they called "true or strict Calvinism") of their Particular Baptist forefathers. This

revitalized Reformed theology gave birth to the modern missionary movement with the formation of the Particular Baptist Missionary Society in 1792.

Baptists in America

In the seventeenth century both General and Particular Baptists joined others in the quest for religious freedom by sailing to America. The Particular Baptists were the first to actually organize churches in the new land. Though he remained a Baptist for only a short while, Roger Williams founded the first Baptist church in America in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1639. The next year John Clarke established a Baptist church in Newport, Rhode Island, which by 1644 had adopted immersion as the proper mode of baptism.

Overall, General Baptists fared far better than their Calvinistic counterparts in the New England colonies. In the Middle Colonies and the South, however, it was the Particular Baptists who took the lead. The development and character of Baptist work in the South is reflected in the organization and outreach of early associations. The first three Baptist associations in America were also the three most influential in shaping the faith and practice of Baptist churches in the South.

The Philadelphia Association

Pennsylvania proved to be fertile soil for Baptist work in the eighteenth century. The first Baptist church was formed there in Pennepek in 1688 by Elias Keach, the son of the famous Benjamin Keach, a Particular Baptist pastor in England. Through the younger Keach's strenuous labors several other churches were planted in and around Philadelphia. In 1707 five of these churches joined to form the Philadelphia Association, which not only was the first but also soon became the most influential Baptist Association in America. These congregations recognized the *1689 Second London Confession* as their own. In 1742 they formally adopted a version of that confession which Benjamin and Elias Keach had slightly edited to include articles on hymn singing and laying on of hands.

These churches were so crystal clear in their affirmation of Calvinism that one former Southern Baptist theologian derisively referred to the association as the "Philadelphia Synod" and to the church members as "baptizing Presbyterians."⁹ The Philadelphia Association sent numerous missionaries and church planters throughout the South during the middle and latter eighteenth century. It was responsible for the rapid growth of "Regular Baptist" (which is what Calvinistic Baptists came to be called) churches and associations in the South.

The Charleston Association

The next influential association in the South was the Charleston Baptist Association. It also has the distinction of being the first association on southern soil.

The First Baptist Church of Charleston was instrumental in organizing the association. This church, which was the first Baptist church in the South, was actually founded in Kittery, Maine, in 1682 by William Screven. It began as a Particular Baptist church, having formally adopted the *Second London Confession*. In 1696 Screven and the congregation moved to Charleston, where four years later they reaffirmed their adherence to the *1689 Confession*.¹⁰

In 1751, under the leadership of Oliver Hart and the influence of the Philadelphia Association, the Charleston Association was founded. Sixteen years later, in 1767, the association adopted the *Second London Confession*. Through the influence of this association across the South, Reformation theology became even more firmly embedded in the Baptist movement.

The Sandy Creek Association (Separate Baptist)

The Great Awakening that swept through the American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s made a significant impact on Baptists in two ways. First, the comparatively few Baptist churches that existed at the time were directly affected by the revival and saw tremendous growth in their memberships. Second, many Congregationalist churches that developed out of the revival eventually became Baptist. One historian has described these “New Light” Congregational churches as “halfway house[s] on the road to becoming Baptists.”¹¹ Most of these who made the change to believers’ baptism had been converted under George Whitefield. This phenomenon caused the great evangelist to muse, “My chickens are becoming ducks!” Baptists gained over a hundred new churches this way in addition to gaining some of their most outstanding leaders, such as Isaac Backus, Daniel Marshall and Shubal Stearns.¹²

These churches born out of revival became known as “Separate Baptist,” and they saw rapid growth in the South and on the frontier. The most incredible display of such growth came through the ministry of Shubal Stearns and his brother-in-law, Daniel Marshall.

In 1755 Stearns and Marshall moved to Sandy Creek, North Carolina, where they started the first Separate Baptist church in the South. They began with sixteen people and within three years had three fully constituted churches with a combined membership of over 900. In only seventeen years this church gave birth to forty-two churches and sent out 125 ministers.

In 1758 the Sandy Creek Association was formed. The Separate Baptist churches that joined together in forming it had a healthy skepticism regarding confessions and creeds. This grew out of experience with the dead orthodoxy they had left behind in Congregationalism. This distinguished them from the Regular Baptists, who were enthusiastically confessional in their churches. However, this distinction must not be stretched beyond what the historical record will bear.

Regular Baptists, Separate Baptists and Calvinism

Some historians have interpreted the Separate Baptist “aversion to creeds” to mean that they were opposed to doctrinal precision in general and to Reformed theology in particular. The “Sandy Creek tradition,” as it has been called, has been unjustly described as consisting of an evangelistic zeal that was in some sense hostile to the Calvinism of the Regular Baptists. According to this perspective it “minimized Calvinism and emphasized evangelism.”¹³ The historical record, however, simply will not bear this judgment. The following three reasons are sufficient to make this plain.

1. Regular Baptists were thoroughly evangelistic

In the first place, the Calvinism of the Regular Baptists was thoroughly evangelical, as the work of the Philadelphia and Charleston Associations clearly demonstrate.¹⁴ The parasite of hyper-Calvinism did develop in some churches (especially in Kentucky), but this was rightly regarded as a perversion of Reformed theology.¹⁵ Evangelistic concern, therefore, would not have been foreign to Regular Baptists, nor would Separate Baptists have thought it to be so. The eventual union of Regular and Separate Baptists in the South was not at all encumbered by any perceived lack of evangelistic concern on the part of the Regulars.

During Oliver Hart’s ministry as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Charleston, the congregation sent a request to the meeting of the Charleston Association in November, 1755. They asked the association to secure a missionary to labor among the destitute people “in the interior settlements of this and neighboring States.”¹⁶ This took place *before* Daniel Marshall and Shubal Stearns migrated from Opekon, Virginia to begin the Separate Baptist movement at Sandy Creek. In response to the church’s request, the association commissioned John Gano to preach the gospel at the Jersey Settlement on the banks of the Yadkin River—not far from Sandy Creek—in what is now North Carolina. Far from being a dividing point, Sandy Creek actually became something of a meeting point for the evangelistic fervor of both the Charleston and Separate Baptists.

Furthermore, a later pastor of FBC Charleston, Richard Furman, helped organize the General Missionary Convention (Triennial Convention) in 1814. At the organizational meeting on May 21 of that year, the delegates asked Furman to preach. His closing appeal clearly refutes the charge that “Charleston Calvinists” were something less than concerned for evangelism and missions.

Let the wise and good employ their counsels; the minister of Christ, who is qualified for the sacred service, offer himself for the work; the man of wealth and generosity, who values the glory of Immanuel and the salvation of souls more than gold, bring of his treasure in proportion as God has bestowed on him; yea, let all, even the pious widow, bring the mite

that can be spared; and let all who fear and love God, unite in the prayer of faith before the throne of Grace; and unceasingly say, "Thy Kingdom come." And O! let it never be forgotten, that the Son of God hath said: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." Amen and Amen.¹⁷

By 1845, the year of the founding of the SBC, the Triennial convention had compiled an impressive missions record: they had missionaries among 8 Indian groups in North America; in numerous European countries as well as in Africa, Burma, Siam, China, Assam, India and Asia. "The total program by 1845 involved 17 missions; 130 mission stations and outstations; 109 missionaries and assistant missionaries, of whom 42 were preachers; 123 native preachers and assistants; 79 churches, 2,593 baptisms in the previous year, and more than 5,000 church members; and 1,350 students in 56 schools."¹⁸

Furman also led his church to participate in a "Quarterly Concert of Prayer for world missions" and recommended this practice to all the churches of the association by 1795. After 1810, the church held this prayer meeting on the first Monday of every month.¹⁹

In 1800 the General Committee of the Charleston Association called on that body to engage even more diligently in the concerted work of missions.

Is there not at this time, a call in providence for our churches to make the most serious exertions, in union with other Christians of various denominations, to send the gospel among the heathen; or to such people who, though living in countries where the gospel revelation is known, do not enjoy a standing ministry, and the regular administration of divine ordinances among them?²⁰

It is obvious from these examples that the Regular Baptists were energetically engaged in the work of evangelism and missions.

2. Separate Baptists came from a Reformed background and were very Calvinistic

Secondly, it must not be forgotten that the Separate Baptists came from a background of Congregationalism, which had as its confessional foundation the *Savoy Declaration*, which was a thoroughly Reformed confession of faith. Those who separated from Congregationalism after the Great Awakening did so not because they rejected Reformed theology but because they rejected a dead formalism that substituted agreement with a creed for vital, experiential Christianity. Separate Baptists were not people with no theological convictions. And the insights we have into those convictions declare an agreement with that Calvinistic

understanding of salvation which has been handed down from the Protestant Reformation.²¹

For example, the first covenant of the Separate Baptist Sandy Creek church contained strong affirmations of predestination, effectual calling, and perseverance of the saints. The preamble states:

Holding believers' baptism; laying on of hands; *particular election of grace by predestination of God in Christ*; effectual calling by the Holy Ghost; free justification through the imputed righteousness of Christ; progressive sanctification through God's grace and truth; the final perseverance, or continuance of the saints in grace....²²

When the Sandy Creek Association adopted their *Articles of Faith* in 1816, the decidedly Calvinistic Basil Manly, Sr., chaired the committee that wrote them. It is not surprising, then, to read in Article III:

That Adam fell from his original state of purity, and that his sin is imputed to his posterity; that human nature is corrupt, and that man, of his own free will and ability, is impotent to regain the state in which he was primarily placed.

Also in Article IV:

We believe in election from eternity, effectual calling by the Holy Spirit of God, and justification in his sight only by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. And we believe that they who are thus elected, effectually called, and justified, will persevere through grace to the end, that none of them be lost.²³

Here we have four of the five points of Calvinism stated and affirmed by the Separate Baptists of North Carolina. This is consistent with the report which David Benedict gives of the unification of Regular and Separate Baptists in Virginia in 1787. During the negotiations, the Separates assured the Regulars that, although they had never formally adopted a full confession of faith, the large majority of them nevertheless believed the Regular Baptist confession just as strongly as did the Regulars themselves.²⁴

Even more telling are the doctrinal commitments that were embedded in the foundation of churches that Separate Baptists planted in Georgia. The Kiokee Baptist Church was planted by Daniel Marshall in 1772. The covenant that the church adopted at its founding opens with these unequivocal words:

According to God's appointment in His Word, we do hereby in His name and strength covenant and promise to keep up and defend all the

articles of faith, according to God's Word, such as the great doctrine of election, effectual calling, particular redemption, justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ alone, sanctification by the spirit of God, believers' baptism by immersion, the saints' absolute final perseverance in grace, the resurrection of the dead, future rewards and punishments, etc., all according to Scripture which we take as the rule of our faith and practice, with some other doctrines herein not mentioned, as are commanded and supported by that blessed Book: denying the Arian, Socinian, and Arminian errors, and every other principle contrary to the Word of God. Now yet since we are exhorted to prove all things, orderly ministers of any denomination may when invited, preach in our meeting house.²⁵

These doctrinal commitments are representative of those held by churches that formed the Georgia Baptist Association in 1784.

3. Leading Separate Baptist pastors were Calvinists

Not all Separate Baptist pastors were convinced Calvinists, but many of their most prominent pastors were. The Separate Baptist commitment to Reformed theology is clearly evident in the expressed convictions of leaders such as Shubal Stearns, Daniel and Abraham Marshall, Richard Furman and Isaac Backus.²⁶ The latter, in 1797, near the end of his life, wrote:

The enmity which men have discovered against the sovereignty of the grace of God as revealed in Holy Scriptures hath now prevailed so far that every art is made use of to put other senses upon the words of revelation which than God intended therein. He said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy," Rom. 9:15–16. This was the doctrine that God made use of in all the reformation that wrought in Germany, England and Scotland after the year 1517; and by the same doctrine he wrought all the reformation that has been in our day, both in Europe and America.²⁷

The church covenant from the Kiokee Baptist church demonstrates that the founding pastor, Daniel Marshall, was convinced of the doctrines of grace. Inspired by the impassioned preaching of George Whitefield, Marshall became a Presbyterian missionary to the Mohawk Indians along the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. When hostilities among various tribes forced his removal from that work, he settled near Winchester, Virginia and began worshiping with a Baptist church that belonged to the Philadelphia Association. His son writes that only after "a close and impartial examination of their faith and order" (which certainly

would have included the *Philadelphia Confession of Faith*) did he and his wife submit to baptism.²⁸

Abraham himself was instrumental in writing the first articles of faith for the Georgia Baptist Association of churches in 1790. Called the “Abstract and Decorum,” the articles reflect the Calvinism of the *Philadelphia Confession*.

- 3d. We believe in the fall of Adam, and the imputation of his sin to his posterity. In the corruption of human nature, and the impotency of man to recover himself by his own free will—ability.
- 4th. We believe in the everlasting love of God to his people, and the eternal election of a definite number of the human race, to grace and glory: And that there was a covenant of grace or redemption made between the Father and the Son, before the world began, in which their salvation is secure, and that they in particular are redeemed.
- 5th. We believe that sinners are justified in the sight of God, only by the righteousness of Christ imputed to them.
- 6th. We believe that all those who were chosen in Christ, will be effectually called, regenerated, converted, sanctified, and supported by the spirit and power of God, so that they shall persevere in grace, and not one of them be finally lost.²⁹

The three associations—Philadelphia, Charleston, and Sandy Creek—that were largely responsible for the spread of Baptist work throughout the South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were all consciously devoted to Reformational Christianity. That is, they all adopted confessions of faith that affirm the basic tenets of the Protestant and Reformed view of salvation. In the case of Philadelphia and Charleston, the confession of faith was essentially the *Second London Confession of 1689*, the most Reformed of all the major Baptist confessions. Through these streams Southern Baptists trace our heritage. What they teach us is that many of the roots of our biblical convictions extend all the way back to that great movement of God in the sixteenth century known as the Protestant Reformation.

Conclusion

The evidence which has been presented clearly demonstrates that Southern Baptists come from Reformation stock. For all of the important distinctives that separate us from the leading Protestant Reformers, Baptists owe a debt of grati-

tude to God for those faithful leaders of the sixteenth century. With all of their shortcomings, they were nevertheless used of God to return to the Scripture alone for their authority. By doing so they rediscovered the blessed gospel of God—that gospel that reveals salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and brings glory to God alone. To this, surely, every Southern Baptist can say, “Amen!”

When those 293 delegates registered in Augusta, Georgia, in May, 1845, to form a new denomination, they assembled from churches and associations which consciously held to a Reformed or Calvinistic understanding of salvation. One notable example is Patrick Hues Mell. In addition to being one of the original delegates who founded the Southern Baptist Convention, Mell went on to become one of the most influential leaders which the denomination has ever produced. He served as President of the convention for seventeen years.

In 1851 The Southern Baptist Publication Society published Mell’s “concise and popular exposition” of the doctrines of grace.³⁰ He produced this work not only to refute some attacks by a non-Baptist writer, but also to counteract what he saw as some tendencies toward Arminianism among his Baptist brethren.³¹

Mell’s concern for sound doctrine determined the character of his pastoral ministry. Mrs. D. B. Fitzgerald, one of the long-time members of the Antioch Baptist Church in Oglethorpe, Georgia, where Mell served as pastor, described his initial efforts at the church with the following words:

When first called to take charge of the church Dr. Mell found it in a sad state of confusion. He said a number of the members were drifting off into Arminianism. He loved the truth too well to blow hot and cold with the same breath. It was a Baptist church and it must have doctrines peculiar to that denomination preached to it. and with that boldness, clearness, and vigor of speech that marked him, he preached to them the doctrines of predestination, election, free-grace, etc. He said it was always his business to preach the truth as he found it in God’s Word, and the leave the matter there, feeling that God would take of the results.³²

This is the spiritual and doctrinal heritage of the Southern Baptist Convention. We are witnessing a growing revival of this heritage in our day. With the return to the authority of God’s Word, such an outcome is inevitable. In a sense, this renewal is nothing less than a doctrinal homecoming for Southern Baptists. It is a return to the faith of our fathers. And if what our Baptist and Southern Baptist forefathers believed was true in their day, it is still true today—the Bible has not changed, God has not changed, and truth has not changed.

This revival is not something to be feared by those who do not understand it or who disagree with its theology. All Bible believing Southern Baptists will readily acknowledge that the last fifty years of our denomination’s history have left the majority of our churches in need of spiritual revitalization. When the unregener-

ate members of our churches far outnumber the regenerate members, something is terribly wrong. When most of our 16.3 million members never even attend a church worship service on Sunday, it is obvious that we have problems. When only a small fraction of our churches even attempt to practice discipline anymore, it is time for us to wake up and admit that we need help.

My prayer is that the Lord is in the process of sending help by calling us back to the healthier streams of biblical Christianity that characterized earlier generations of Southern Baptist life. Theological nicknames are not important. Neither is “winning” a doctrinal debate. In fact, my hope is that no Southern Baptist will try to coerce another to “dot every ‘i’ and cross every ‘t’” on the fine points of theology. Such efforts are unhealthy and distracting. What we need—what we absolutely must have—is a return to the doctrine and practice of the churches of the New Testament.

I like what that great nineteenth-century Southern Baptist statesman John A. Broadus said about this matter. When he was traveling through Switzerland, gazing at the majestic Alps, he wrote the following in a letter which was published in the *Western Recorder*:

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 anyone who really understands the Greek of the Apostle Paul or the Latin of Calvin and Turretin can fail to see that these latter did but interpret and formulate substantially what the former teaches... Whatever the inspired writers meant to teach is authoritative, the truth of God.³³

What does Geneva have to do with Nashville? Precisely this: The biblical doctrines of God’s grace which were expounded so clearly in the former are the theological heritage of the denomination whose main offices are located in the latter. So you may legitimately refer to those in our denomination who are returning to this heritage as “Calvinists.” Or you may call them “Reformed” in their theology. Whatever label one uses, it should be remembered that this resurgence in the doctrines of grace is a recovery of the doctrinal foundations of the SBC. ❶

Notes:

¹ Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation, a Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 173.

² William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (first published 1862; reprint edition, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 1.

³ There were, of course, notable exceptions. A small but stubborn stream of teachers who insisted on predestination and election can be traced throughout the middle ages. Among them were Gottschalk of Orbais, Thomas Bradwardine and Gregory of Rimini.

⁴ Joe Underwood, “Retired Missions Leader Wonders if Loyalty is to Calvin or Jesus?” *Baptists Today* (March 9, 1995), 16.

⁵ J. I. Packer, “Introductory Essay” in John Owens, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1959), 3.

⁶ One of the finest treatments of true Calvinism and hyper-Calvinism is Iain Murray, *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism: The Battle for Gospel Preaching* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995).

⁷ William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, revised edition (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 152.

⁸ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1988), 233.

⁹ Molly Marshall, at the inaugural Hoover Lectures at Richmond Seminary, April, 1995; tape transcript.

¹⁰ *The Charleston Confession of Faith, A Summary of Church Discipline*, and *The Baptist Catechism*, all of which were published by the Charleston Association, have been recently reprinted under the title, *Some Southern Documents* (Birmingham, AL: Society for Biblical and Southern Studies, 1995).

¹¹ W.G. McLoughlin, quoted in H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1987), 205

¹² McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 203.

¹³ Fisher Humphreys, *The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed and What it Means to Us All* (New York: McCracken Press, 1994), 85. Humphreys follows the view of Walter Shurden as set forth in “The 1980–81 Carver-Barnes Lectures” (Wake Forest, NC: Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1980). William G. McLoughlin sees the distinctions between Separate and Regular Baptists as having little or nothing to do with Calvinism. Both groups were, in his estimation, convinced of Calvinistic theology. When describing the decline of the General, or Arminian Baptists of New England in the late eighteenth century, McLoughlin parenthetically identifies the Baptists who were “Calvinists” as “the Separate Baptists.” He further explains that “in the South the Calvinists split into two wings, the Regular, or Particular Baptists (led by evangelists from the Philadelphia Baptist Association like [Benjamin] Miller and [Peter P.] Van Horne), and the Separates (led by New England Separate Baptists)” in *The Diary of Isaac Backus* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1979), 3:1246.

¹⁴ See McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 239–42.

¹⁵ See Purefoy, *A History of the Sandy Creek Baptist Association* (first published New York: Sheldon & Co., 1859; reprint edition, New York: Arno Press, 1980), 55–60, in which Purefoy calls the hyper-Calvinists, “The New Baptists.”

¹⁶ Cited in Robert A. Baker and Paul J. Craven, Jr., *Adventure in Faith, the First 300 Years of First Baptist Church, Charleston, South Carolina* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1982), 156.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 221–22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

²¹ This point is clearly demonstrated by comparing the two confessions of faith which Isaac Backus wrote for churches he served. Before coming to Baptist convictions, Backus wrote a confession and covenant for the Titicut Separate Church in 1748. It is thoroughly Calvinistic and advocates paedobaptism. Seven years later, after becoming

a Baptist, Backus performed the same service for the First Baptist Church at Middleborough. Though the latter document advocates believers' baptism, it maintains the same Calvinistic stance which is found in the earlier confession (at times, employing identical language). See Backus *Diary*, 3:1529–32, 1588–92.

²² George Washington Paschal, *History of North Carolina Baptists* (Raleigh, NC: The General Board of North Carolina Baptist State Convention, 1930), 1:401. Paschal doubts, without justification, those records which attribute this covenant, including the preamble, to Shubal Stearns. See also William Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1961), 36 and McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, 229.

²³ Purefoy, *A History*, 104–5.

²⁴ David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America*, (Boston, MA: Manning & Loring, 1813), 60–62; quoted in McBeth, *A Sourcebook for The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1990), 164–65.

²⁵ Timothy and Denise George, editors, *Baptist Confessions, Covenants and Catechisms* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 205–6. This statement was revised in 1826 concerning how members were received and dismissed. See Thomas Ray, *Memoirs of Daniel and Abraham Marshall, Pioneer Baptist Evangelists to the South*, expanded and illustrated edition (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2006), 24.

²⁶ McLoughlin says of Stearns that “his style of preaching did much to set the tone of the new evangelical Calvinism of the revival that broke out in Virginia and North Carolina” (Backus, *Diary*, 3:1248). Tom Nettles has described Furman as a “staunch Calvinist” (*By His Grace and for His Glory*, [Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006], xxxix).

²⁷ Alvah Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times of Isaac Backus* (1858; reprint edition, Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1991), 356; quoted in Iain H. Murray, *Revival & Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750–1858* (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 181–82.

²⁸ Jesse Mercer, *A History of the Georgia Baptist Association* (Washington, GA: NP, 1838; reprint edition, 1979), 371.

²⁹ Ray, *Memoirs*, 247–48.

³⁰ Mell, *A Southern Baptist Looks at Predestination* (Cape Coral, FL: Christian Gospel Foundation, n.d.), 15. This is a reprint of the original work which was entitled, *Predestination and the Saints Perseverance State and Defended* (Charleston, SC: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1851). The material in this book first appeared as a series of articles in the *Christian Index*, the Baptist paper of Georgia.

³¹ Mell, *A Southern Baptist Looks at Predestination*, 15–16.

³² P. H. Mell, Jr., *Life of Patrick Hues Mell* (Louisville, KY: Baptist Book Concern, 1895), 58–59.

³³ *Life and Letters of John A. Broadus*, (American Baptist Publication Society, 1901; reprint edition, Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1987), 396–97.

Lest We Forget

The “Solas” of the Reformation

Earl Blackburn

Rudyard Kipling realized that when nations rise to wealth and power, just like Ancient Israel in Deuteronomy 8, they are inclined to forget God. He immortalized this reality in his poem “Recessional,” written on the 50th anniversary of Queen Victoria’s reign.

Far-called, our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire:
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget —lest we forget!

What is true of nations is equally true of the Church. Easily and quickly we forget where we came from and what made us great. One such thing that lies forgotten in the distant and cluttered halls of evangelical minds is the Protestant Reformation. It was not by accident that something divine, heaven-wrought took place 490 years ago in Wittenburg, Germany that literally shook the world. Energy should be expended and every endeavor made to remember the history and cherish the purpose and doctrine that great movement of God in the sixteenth century gave us. It must be remembered that the Protestant Reformation was nothing more than an attempt to restore apostolic Christianity and teaching. And while that which we so dearly love, preach and defend is called the Reformed Faith—along with its many associate synonyms such as Calvinism, Sovereign Grace, the Doctrines of Grace—it is nothing more than a return to biblical and apostolic teaching and practice. The Reformed Faith changed the face of the world, especially the church and western civilization, and we are enjoying its fruits today. But, sadly we have forgotten.

The Renaissance readied the stage for the Reformation. With its blooming, the medieval culture became enlightened and the Arts flourished. Men began to think in a freer manner. Science and medicine advanced, even though men like Galileo were checked and threatened. Meanwhile, the religious scene was in a

darkness that could be felt. John Calvin described it as “very miserable, and almost desperate.”¹ There had been pre-Reformation reformers such as Wycliffe, Hus, Jerome of Prague, Savonarola and other such luminaries, but the light of Christ, for the most part, was still extinguished. Roman Catholicism dominated Europe and wherever its claws had their damning grip the Scriptures were chained, priestcraft and superstition ruled, and the common man was stifled and suppressed. Fear of papal damnation bound and controlled the minds of the people. The public worship of God, which did nothing to alleviate their fear and help them on to know Christ, was nothing more than mysticism and theatrical nonsense. Many times in his treatise on *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, John Calvin used the words “theatrical exhibition,” “vain theatrical show,” “showy ceremonies,” and “frivolous performances.”² A survey of the contemporary Christian scene will reveal that there is not too much difference between the worship then and now.

Calvin described the state of the Church, namely Roman Catholicism, as being one where impiety was commonplace. “... Impiety,” he said, “so stalked abroad, that almost no doctrine of religion was pure from admixture, no ceremony free from error, no part... of divine worship untarnished by superstition.”³ He continues by saying,

Ambition as well as audacity has so far prevailed, that the truth of God lies buried under innumerable lies, that all his [Christ’s] institutions are polluted by the basest corruptions; his worship is in every part vitiated, the doctrine of faith is wholly subverted, the sacraments are adulterated, the government of the Church is turned into barbarous tyranny... and in the place of Christianity is substituted a dreadful profanation.⁴

Notice how he concludes by positing some strong penetrating assertions, “The light of divine truth has been extinguished, the word of God buried, the virtue of Christ left in profound oblivion, and the pastoral office subverted.”⁵ And he says, “We may safely denounce an anathema on the whole theology of the Pope, for it wholly obscures the true light.”⁶

While the picture may have looked dark and gloomy, behind the backdrop of this picture God was preparing a great and lasting work that could not be stopped by the hands of men. The Father was making sure that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church that Christ was building (Matthew 16:18). It began with a German Augustinian monk named Martin Luther. The nailing of his *95 Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg in 1517 generated the spark that lit the fire of the Reformation. Luther only intended his theses to be a catalyst for debate, not a cause for disruption. However, his boldness spread throughout every center of scholastic learning like wildfire. Luther’s biographer Myconius claims that the contents of the *95 Theses* were known throughout all Germany within two weeks and throughout Europe within one month. This was without the means of modern communication and mass media.

From there, the rest is history. The debate was on and division would occur. Diets were called, armies alerted and the work of reform begun. Luther would write tracts and treatises, preach, defend himself, be excommunicated from Rome, be captured and held in safety, and translate the Scriptures into German. When called upon to recant, recant this German monk did. But not in the way you think. In a letter to his friend Spalatin he wrote, “Previously I said the pope is the vicar of Christ. I recant. Now I say the pope is the adversary of Christ and the apostle of the Devil.”⁷ Again in his “Assertion of All the Articles Wrongly Condemned in the Roman Bull,” where he speaks against indulgences, he writes,

I was wrong. I admit it, when I said that indulgences were “the pious defrauding of the faithful.” I recant and say, “Indulgences are the most impious frauds and impostors of the most rascally pontiffs, by which they deceive the souls and destroy the goods of the faithful.”⁸

Also in the same treatise, he defends the writings of John Hus, that were condemned by the Pope, saying,

I was wrong. I retract the statement that certain articles of John Hus are evangelical. I say now, “Not some but all the articles of John Hus were condemned by Antichrist and his apostles in the synagogue of Satan.” And to your face most holy Vicar of God, I say freely that all the condemned articles of John Hus are evangelical and Christian, and yours are downright impious and diabolical.⁹

Calvin and others were converted, and shortly thereafter followed in Luther’s footsteps. The culture and social strata of medieval Europe would be changed by the religious winds of reform blowing over the continent. A new day of religious freedom and propagation of the saving truth of God would dawn. The saving gospel of Christ would emerge from the throes of Satan in an unprecedented and unparalleled way not seen since the days of the Apostles.

How did this come about? How would the Reformers overcome, to quote Calvin, this “species of foul and insufferable tyranny?”¹⁰ They overcame the darkness of the centuries through their message. They knew the only way to defeat Rome’s pernicious error was with the message of truth. Truth was the means by which falsehood was to be confronted and slain. Having been sovereignly regenerated and converted, the Reformers had seared into their souls a love for the eternal truths of God.

Where were they to find the truth of God? They turned in their battle against error to that which had so long been kept from the common man—the sacred Scriptures. Their message was direct and penetrating. While they negatively denounced the atrocities of Rome, they positively set forth a clear and clarion message. They said many things, which never left their hearers or readers in doubt as

to where they stood. The summary of their message is encapsulated in what is called the five “solas” of the Reformation. I intend in the remainder of this article to briefly expound these “solas,” and, as much as possible, let the two main Reformers, (Martin Luther and John Calvin), speak for themselves in these matters.

Sola Scriptura —The Scriptures Alone

It was to the Scriptures that everything must rise or fall. “God rejects, condemns, abominates,” voices Calvin, “all fictitious worship, and employs his Word as a bridle to keep us in unqualified obedience.”¹¹ Tradition and decretals must come under the scrutiny of the light of God’s Word and be judged thereby. Like the prophet Isaiah says it was “to the Law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isaiah 8:20 NKJV).

You cannot read the writings of the Reformers without becoming profoundly aware of their reliance on the infallible Scriptures. Though they were quite conversant with the patristic Fathers and “traditions,” the Word of God permeated their writing and was everything to them. Having lived so long in the darkness of human tradition, they, like the Psalmist, found the Word of God to be their chief delight (see Psalm 119:16). Not only was it their chief delight, it was their sword and shield with which they pierced the hearts of their enemies and defended themselves against the Adversary’s onslaughts. It was their battering ram by which they knocked down the walls of falsehood. It was the foundation upon which they built all their beliefs and the standard by which everything was to be judged. The Holy Bible was their only rule of faith and practice. The Reformers’ primary complaint against the theologians and polemicists, who attacked them, was the Romanists’ neglect of Scripture. In his reply to the papal bull condemning Lutheran doctrine, Luther wrote, ... this bull condemns me from its own word without any proof from Scripture, whereas I back up all my assertions from the Bible. I ask thee, ignorant Antichrist, dost thou think that with thy naked words thou canst prevail against the armor of Scripture?¹²

I will never forget attending a missions conference and hearing a noted Reformed Baptist speaker ask this question, “Above all others, what is the one point that all Calvinists wish to get across to men?” While he momentarily paused, I thought to myself, “What could it be? Is it the sovereignty of God? Unconditional election? Particular redemption? The glory of Christ? What? Surely it must be one of these.” Quickly he answered his rhetorical question with this reply, “The one point, above all others, the Calvinist wishes to get across to men is this: the Word of God, all of the Word of God and it alone!”¹³ Not part of the Word, or some of the Word of God, or most of the Word, but *all* of the Word of God. The Scripture, and it alone, is the means God has ordained to lead sinners into the way of life and Christians into the path of blessing.

This is what the Reformers desired above everything else. They longed for everyone, from the Pope to the plowman, from the King to the kitchen scullion, from the magistrate to the maid to submit to the government and rule of all of the Word of God and it alone. Hence, *Sola Scriptura*!

Solo Christo—Christ Alone

What is Christianity without Christ? Blinded by the guile of Satan, Romanists substituted the veneration of Mary for the person and work of Christ. While the Reformers honored Mary, just as the Scriptures honor her, they knew she was a sinner in need of a Savior just like everyone else. According to Rome, the saints assisted Mary in the work of redemption. Calvin was quick to observe that "... passing by Christ, the only Mediator, each betook himself to the patron who had struck his fancy, or if at any time a place was given to Christ, it was one in which he remained unnoticed, like some ordinary individual in a crowd."¹⁴ To further confuse minds, Rome carved images with its own hands and taught the people that the essence of God resided in them. The Savior was eclipsed by the brightness of the idols' gold. "Hence, divine honours were paid to images, and prayers everywhere offered to them, under the pretense that the power and deity of God resided in them. Hence, too, dead saints were worshipped exactly in the manner in which of old Israelites worshipped Baalim."¹⁵ All of these unbiblical, usurping mediators were an abomination to the Reformers. For while these surrogates appeared to be necessary and good, they were in reality an attack against Christ.

The Reformers responded to Rome's diabolical actions by constantly exalting Christ in their preaching and writings. Luther made Christ the center of his writings, just as he found Christ to be the center of Scripture. "Everything," says Luther, "depends on the article of Christ, and everything is involved in it. Whoever has this article has everything; and Christians must engage in the severest conflict on its behalf and must forever strive and struggle to remain loyal to it."¹⁶ Because Christ and His salvation had been long kept from them, the Reformers passionately preached Him as the only Savior of sinners and the center of the Christian life. They refused to allow anything to usurp His rightful place as the *only* Mediator between God and man, and as the *only* One who has authority and power on earth to forgive sin (see Mark 2:10).

The men God raised up for the hour did not mince words when it came to the person and work of Christ. "There is no part of our salvation which may not be found in Christ," they boldly proclaimed.¹⁷ "The whole gospel is contained in Christ."¹⁸ He was precious to their souls and they refused to allow Mary, saints, angels, images, priests or anything to share in the glorious work of reconciling sinners to a thrice holy God. "Christ is the beginning, middle and end... nothing is, or can be found, apart from him."¹⁹ "For God has made everything depend on this Man, has directed everything, has turned everything, has given everything

into His hand.”²⁰ Everything for the Reformers revolved around Christ, and Him alone. “Solo Christo” was their cry.

Sola Gratia—Grace Alone

How were sinners made right with God? This question has perpetually plagued man from Job’s day to ours. Adam and Eve thought the fig leaves, cut down with their own hands, would cover them from the all-scrutinizing eye of God. They reasoned and thought their own works would make them acceptable before God. It is not surprising, then, that Cain followed in the first example of his parents. Rome quickly perverted the apostles’ teaching of salvation by grace alone, and added to it the meritorious efforts performed by the faithful. These deeds included the seven sacraments of baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist or the mass, penance, extreme unction, orders and matrimony; along with a host of other works such as prayers for the dead, repetitious chantings, almsgiving and other works of supererogation.

These things the Reformers could not abide. Their minds and hearts had been enlightened by the Holy Scriptures and they knew the truth that sets men free. From first to last, they proclaimed salvation was by grace alone. Calvin knew the fountainhead of salvation sprang from eternity past and God’s eternal decree. “Salvation,” he taught, “ought to be ascribed exclusively to his [God’s] election, which is of free grace.”²¹

The Reformers understood that man’s fall in Adam left him so helpless and without any spiritual power that nothing could recover him from his fallen state but the sovereign, almighty grace of God. Man’s will was not untainted, non-depraved, but hopelessly bound in sin along with every other part of his fallen humanity. Luther saw man’s inability as the key to understanding redemption. Erasmus of Rotterdam, the Catholic apologist and humanist, wrote in great depth defending free will in order to attack Luther at this point. Luther said that Erasmus was the only one who truly understood him and that is why he wrote, in response to Erasmus, what is perhaps his most famous book, *The Bondage of the Will*.

To mix free will with grace was to corrupt grace and defile the whole of true salvation. Calvin rightly analyzed, “For any mixture of the power of free will that men strive to mingle with God’s grace is nothing but a corruption of grace. It is just as if one were to dilute wine with muddy, bitter water.”²² The Reformers knew that man could not attribute believing in Christ as an act of his own power, for “faith itself is a part of grace.”²³ Even the good works that a Christian does are a result of the grace of God operating within him. As Calvin so pointedly reminded us, “Whatever is praiseworthy in our works proceeds from the grace of God.”²⁴

Salvation from beginning to end must be of grace. If anything was added to it, then it would be polluted and thus cease being the salvation of the true and living God. That is why the Reformers were so zealous for *Sola Gratia*.

Sola Fide—Faith Alone

Once grace was established as the way God saves sinners, how then was this salvation to be received? How was one to obtain the salvation of God and be made just in His sight? The Reformers likewise spoke on this issue with a united voice. God has clearly established in the Scriptures the means or avenue whereby His salvation is received. It is through faith alone.

Naked faith, as opposed to works of any sort, was that which pleased God and by which sinners were saved. From a thorough exegesis of the Scriptures, the Reformers knew that “the contrite heart abjures the idea of merit, and has no dealings with God upon the principle of exchange.”²⁵ Faith in one’s works, hoping thus to be made acceptable in the sight of the Lord, would damn the soul forever. Faith alone, in Christ alone, was the only thing that would bring a sinner into the presence of God safely. Even the faith by which a sinner apprehends the mercy of God and receives Christ as Prophet, Priest and King is a gift of God sovereignly given (see Ephesians 2:8–10 and Philippians 1:29).

The fruit of faith is justification. Without any equivocation, Luther asserts, “The article of justification, which is our only protection, not only against all the powers and plottings of men but also against the gates of hell, is this: by faith alone in Christ, without works, are we declared just and saved.”²⁶ It is this article of justification by faith alone that made the hearts of the Reformers strong and caused Luther to declare that by it the Church stands, and without which it falls!

The object of faith was not prayers, tears, works, Mary, the saints, the Church or even faith itself, but in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. “But when faith performs its proper office,” declares Luther, “it looks to absolutely nothing except Jesus Christ, the Son of God. . . . It does not say: What have I done? Which sins have I committed? What have I merited?”²⁷ It rather says: What has Christ done? What has Christ merited?” It was not even “for the sake of faith but for Christ’s sake that faith and salvation are given to us.”²⁸ The Reformers understood that it was not faith that saves, but Christ that saves. Faith was simply the hand that receives the Savior. Nothing was to be added to faith or come in between faith and Christ. Anything that did was damnable.

Luther summed up the whole Reformation attitude by saying, “This is the reason why we so greatly extol faith: it brings me divine works, yea, the works of the Lord Jesus Christ, namely His suffering and dying, and makes them my own. Our works are nothing in comparison. We owe Him the honor that He is everything and we are nothing.”²⁹ For the Reformers, it could be nothing but *Sola Fide!*

Soli Deo Gloria—Glory to God Alone

With “the light of divine truth . . . extinguished, the word of God buried, the virtue of Christ left in profound oblivion,” the glory of God was stripped from the

Church.³⁰ Rome would speak of the glory of God, but knew nothing of its reality or of its motivation. The religious state was in such a sorry condition at the time of the Reformation that Calvin could report, “There is scarcely one among a hundred who makes the manifestation of God’s glory his chief end.”³¹ Man was exalted and human pride was flattered. Saints, martyrs, popes and prelates were given the preeminence. “In word, indeed, they concede to God the glory of all that is good, but, in reality, they rob him of the half, or more than half, by partitioning his perfections among the saints.”³² Through its entire system of righteousness by works, Rome had grossly violated the 8th commandment by stealing glory from God.

Luther clearly understood the chief end of man. “The works of the man in whom God dwells and lives serve only to render praise and honor to Him and to ascribe everything to Him.”³³ Calvin, too, saw that, not only our election,³⁴ but the very end of our existence was for the glory of God.³⁵ Following Paul’s lead, the Reformers were zealous that everything was to be done for the right reason and for the right purpose (see 1 Corinthians 10:31). This was true in all matters of religion and life. Both the salvation of sinners and the damnation of men brought glory to God (see John 13:31). And the whole of life, from the day of one’s birth to the day of one’s death, along with everything in between, was to be governed by this one overriding motive — the glory of God alone. Hence, in their hearts and minds, in public and private, in their ministerial labors and by the hearths of their homes, their watchcry was “Soli Deo Gloria.”

Conclusion

What did their message accomplish? Did these “solas” of the Reformation have an effect on the world of the Reformers? Allow me to give you the thoughts of the secular historian, Will Durant, who was no friend of Christianity or the Reformation. He had this to say in praise of the fruits of the Reformation:

Meanwhile the hard theocracy of Calvin was sprouting democratic buds. The efforts of the Calvinist leaders to give schooling to all, and their inculcation of disciplined character, helped the sturdy burghers of Holland to oust the alien dictatorship of Spain, and supported the revolt of nobles and clergy in Scotland against a fascinating but imperious queen. The stoicism of a hard creed made the strong souls of the Scottish Covenantors, the English and Dutch Puritans, the Pilgrims of New England. It steadied the heart of Cromwell, guided the pen of blind Milton, and broke the power of the backward facing Stuarts. It encouraged brave and ruthless men to win a continent and spread the base of education and self-government until all men could be free. Men who chose their own pastors soon claimed to choose their governors, and the self-ruled congregation became the self-governed municipality. The myth of divine election justified itself in the making of America.³⁶

Durant's unregenerate heart would not allow him to see Reformed theology as the continual foundation for spiritual and social reform. Notice, in a grieving statement with which I strongly disagree, how he deprecates Calvin and the doctrine of predestination.

When this function had been performed, the theory of predestination fell into the backwaters of Protestant belief. As social order returned in Europe after the Thirty Years' War, in England after the revolutions of 1642 and 1689, in America after 1793, the pride of divine election changed into the pride of work and accomplishment; men felt stronger and more secure; fear lessened, and the frightened cruelty that has generated Calvin's God gave way to a more humane vision that compelled a reconception of deity. Decade by decade the churches that had taken their lead from Calvin discarded the harsher elements of his creed. Theologians dared to believe that all who died in infancy were saved, and one respected divine announced without causing commotion, that "the number of the finally lost... will be very inconsiderable." We are grateful to be so reassured, and we will agree that even error lives because it serves some vital need. But we shall always find it hard to love the man who darken the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense.³⁷

It is sad that Durant's sentiments basically mirror the mind of present day Christendom, and many evangelicals in particular. I must be quick to add that they do not reflect those who truly love the gospel of the grace of God. Durant was a blinded fool and did not see or understand what the Scriptures principally teach. Yet, in his blindness, Durant could not help but see the effects of the message of the Reformers.

I have only been able to give you a thumbnail sketch of the of the Reformers' main points of doctrine. But in conclusion, notice the exclusiveness of these "solas." It is not just Scripture, or Christ, or grace, or faith or glory to God. Inseparable and accompanying each of these heaven-revealed principles is the word *alone*. Nothing is to be added to Scripture, Christ, grace and faith, nor is God's glory to be shared with anyone or anything. This is what the Reformers wanted to convey and this is the legacy they left for us to carry on.

These five "solas" thundered forth by the Reformers brought about and sustained the Protestant Reformation. They are the message by which we shall also win the day in which we live. In a time in which increasing pressure is put upon Protestants, and Baptists in particular, to compromise, let us never forget them, forsake them or cease to proclaim them. May we, as long as God gives us breath, preach from the housetops: Scripture alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to God alone be the glory!❶

Notes:

¹ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church [TNORTC]* (1543; reprint ed., Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1994), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 16–19.

³ John Calvin, “Reply to Sadoletto” in *Tracts and Treatises of John Calvin*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 49.

⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 22 vols. (originally printed for the Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh, Scotland; reprint edition, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), *Hebrews* (vol. 22), xxi.

⁵ John Calvin, “Reply to Sadoletto,” 49.

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries, 1 John* (vol. 22), 179.

⁷ Quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1950), 179.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ John Calvin, *TNORTC*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹² Martin Luther, “Against the Execrable Bull of Antichrist” quoted in Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 162.

¹³ Stuart Olyott, from a sermon entitled “Calvinism and Missions” preached at the annual Reformed Baptist Missions Service Convention in Bremen, IN, 1989; tape transcript.

¹⁴ Calvin, *TNORTC*, 8, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶ Quoted in Ewald M. Plass, ed. *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 148.

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentaries, Acts 14–28* (vol. 19), 247.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentaries, Romans* (vol. 19), 19.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Commentaries, Colossians* (vol. 21), 146.

²⁰ Quoted in *What Luther Says*, 202.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentaries, Isaiah 33–66* (vol. 8), 21.

²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), II.v.15.

²³ Calvin, *Commentaries, Romans* (vol. 19), 217.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xv.3.

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries, Psalms*, Psalm 51 (vol. 5), 306.

²⁶ Quoted in *What Luther Says*, 701.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 496.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 489.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 289.

³⁰ Calvin, “Reply to Sadoletto,” 49.

³¹ Calvin, *Commentaries, Psalms*, Psalm 109 (vol. 6), 291.

³² Calvin, *TNORTC*, 7.

³³ Quoted in *What Luther Says*, 538.

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, II.vi.3.

³⁵ Calvin, *Commentaries, Psalms*, Psalm 115 (vol. 6), 358.

³⁶ Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, 11 vols. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), 4:489.

³⁷ Ibid.

Letters

Dr. Ascol,

I am stunned. I had no idea that the SBC had reformed roots. To be honest, that has hit me like a ton of bricks.

I am a Southern Baptist layman (I teach SS and some other classes from time to time) and have been studying reformed theology since just after last year's Southern Baptist Convention. I watched (online) the discussion Dr. Mohler participated in at the Pastors Conference and was curious what it was all about. Truthfully, I began because I wanted to be prepared for the coming problems that the increasing influence of reformed theology would cause in the SBC. I actually expected it to be a short process; boy was I wrong. Now almost a year later I am still studying and reading. During my studies, I recently came across [www.founders.org](http://wwwFOUNDERS.org). I can see that my studies will now take an expanded focus.

I see that there are some great resources listed on your site. Where would you recommend I start in understanding the historical baptist position on reformed theology? Thanks for your help.

T.S., via email

Response from the Editor:

Thanks for your email. It is a real encouragement to read how the Lord has led you in your studies of His Word. I am glad that Founders Ministries has been a source of helpful information for you and trust that it will continue to be that. We have many good resources available for free on our website. Check out the Library section. Beyond that, Tom Nettles' book, *By His Grace and For His Glory*, is the most thorough treatment of our historical roots. The *Founders Journal* (also available from our website) has many good articles through the years on our doctrinal origins. In addition, Sound Word Associates, linked on our site, has audio recordings of all of our national conferences going back 24 years. There have been some great talks given about this subject in those meetings. A sampling of those messages are collected in the book, *Reclaiming the Gospel and Reforming Churches*. A short booklet that you can download from our site is *From the Protestant Reformation to the Southern Baptist Convention: What Hath Geneva to Do with Nashville?*

May the Lord richly bless your life and ministry as you continue to serve Him in your church.

Tom Ascol

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