

# The Founders Journal



Committed to historic Baptist principles

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## THE OTHER RESURGENCE

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# The Founders Journal



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# The Other Resurgence

*Tom Ascol*

The Conservative Resurgence (CR) that marks its official beginning with the election of Adrian Rogers to the SBC presidency at the Houston convention in 1979 has resulted in Southern Baptist institutions and agencies being preserved (and in some cases, rescued) from the corrosive effects of neo-orthodoxy and liberalism. Today, all SBC denominational agencies are led by men who unashamedly affirm the inerrancy of Scripture. The professors in our seminaries have the same conviction.

This recovery has been theologically and spiritually beneficial for the convention. Churches can send students to our seminaries now without fear that they will hear professors either subtly or overtly undermining the authority of God's Word. Churches can have greater confidence that money given for world missions through the Cooperative Program will support missionaries who unequivocally proclaim the exclusivity of Jesus Christ to the nations.

These are blessings from God that all Bible-believing evangelicals should celebrate. Great gains have been made over the last twenty-nine years in the SBC. Two observations about the CR, however, need to be acknowledged as we thank the Lord for all the good that has been done. Both require humble honesty, first as we remember how the CR took place and second, as we look at our current spiritual state today.

The CR did not happen without controversy—lots of controversy. At times expressions of outright hostility were flung back and forth among theological opponents. People's lives were adversely affected. When "movement conservatives" gained the majority on the trustee boards of each of our institutions and agencies, changes were made, often resulting in the forced terminations of key employees. Seminaries became the sites of protests by students and faculty, articles were published decrying the "Fundamentalist takeover" of the convention.

It was not only theological moderates and liberals who were hurt by the changes that took place. Many genuine conservatives also found themselves without jobs or unwilling to work with fellow conservatives who appeared to be so controversial. Though most of the acrimony took place at the institutional level, churches were not completely spared. Members were sometimes divided out of loyalties to alma maters that appeared to be under attack. Other divisions occurred along the lines of which news service reports one trusted.

The point is simply this: the CR did not take place without controversy and disruption—much of it very painful. Anyone who reads church history should not be surprised by this because no reformation has ever occurred without controversy. Conservatives in the SBC should not forget this.

The second observation is more telling and more difficult for champions of the CR to acknowledge. Despite all the good that was accomplished in the CR, Southern Baptist churches are, on the whole, are no better off than they were before 1979. Now, it can be argued (as it has been) that our churches would be even worse today had the CR not occurred to stem the tide of liberalism. Probably that is true. However, the fact remains that, according to statistical analysis, SBC churches still have an overwhelmingly large percentage of members who give no signs of spiritual life.

At some point the question needs to be humbly yet forcefully asked, “What difference does it make if we have an inerrant Bible if we are not willing to believe what it teaches and do what it says?” It is at just this point where a second, more important “CR” holds great hope for the Southern Baptist Convention. Commonly referred to as the “Calvinist Resurgence,” this current movement shares one common ingredient with the first CR but has other significant dissimilarities.

Like the Conservative Resurgence, the Calvinist Resurgence is controversial. Some people are upset about it. Charges and counter-charges swirl around it. What is most interesting is that some of the most strident criticisms and accusations are coming from leaders and supporters of the first CR and are almost identical to the criticisms and accusations that were hurled against them by moderates and liberals over the past twenty-nine years. “Splitting churches,” “hurting missions and evangelism,” “distracting us from our main responsibilities,” “will destroy the convention,” etc. Sound familiar? It should to anyone over forty years old who has been involved in SBC life for the last two decades. Is it not strange that men who were willing to endure all kinds of controversy for the sake of the authority of Scripture now use the presence of controversy to demonize a movement that they fear and may not adequately understand?

Unlike the first CR, however, the current resurgence is not focused on denominational institutions and agencies. It is focused on autonomous local churches. God is raising up large numbers of pastors and church leaders who are not satisfied simply to affirm the inerrancy of Scripture. They are serious about doing the Word. Not all of them are five-point Calvinists. But few if any of them are alarmed by the second CR, because they recognize that at the heart of this movement is not a desire to “Calvinize” the SBC, but to “Christianize” it. You read that correctly. The great problem

with many churches in the Southern Baptist Convention is not that they are not Calvinistic enough, but that it is not Christian enough.

Either Christ is Lord of the church, or He is not. If He is, then local churches have no choice but to follow His clear teaching about how churches are to function. Historically, Baptists have been champions of this principle and have been the vanguard of advocating regenerate church membership and church discipline. The sad but incontrovertible fact is that most Southern Baptist churches give only lip service to these teachings of Christ, if they regard them at all.

That is why your next pastor should not only be an inerrantist, but a Calvinist, because if he is, then, as Tom Nettles points out in his article, several doctrinal and spiritual benefits will attend his ministry. It is also why we should rejoice over the rising generation of pastors and leaders—men like Christian George—who are unwilling simply to thump their Bibles but are deadly serious about believing and following it in their churches. They are not impressed by the trappings of biblical Christianity. They want the real deal, and are willing to pursue that reality and authenticity with joy and abandon.

Reformation is underway. Pray that the Lord will continue to stoke the smoldering embers and fan the flames that are beginning to burn brightly once again in our SBC Zion. ☺

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## News

### Founders Fellowship Breakfast

The Founders Fellowship Breakfast will be held on June 10, 2008 at the SBC in Indianapolis, Indiana. Plan to join us in the Marriott Ballrooms 1, 2, 3, & 4 on Level Two at 6:30 AM. Eric Redmond, will be speaking at this year's breakfast on the theme: "The Reformation That Must Come."

Eric Redmond is an author, Bible teacher, former professor and currently pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Temple Hills, Maryland. He is a member of the board of trustees at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and now serves as 2nd VP of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Register online at: [www.founders.org/conferences/ffb/](http://www.founders.org/conferences/ffb/)

If you register by May 20 you will receive an early purchase discount. The deadline for registration is May 27. **Don't wait to register!** The last two years this breakfast has sold out!

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Conference

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STRENGTHENING THE STAKES:



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# Why Your Next Pastor Should Be a Calvinist

*Tom J. Nettles*

Southern Baptists inherited the most compelling aspects of all the Baptist Calvinists that preceded them. James P. Boyce summarized this well. He encouraged every preacher to get theological education in some way, even if it could not be at the Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina. If no other means were available, he advised, “work at it yourself.” The fathers of the convention did this, Boyce claimed; “They familiarized themselves with the Bible, and Gill and Andrew Fuller, and they made good and effective preachers. God is able to raise up others like them.”<sup>1</sup> But this is the very difficulty that we face at this moment in Southern Baptist history. God indeed is raising up others like them, that is, like the fathers. Whether self-educated or seminary-educated, Boyce and all his contemporaries viewed a Bible theology that reflected a blend of Gill and Fuller as normal and expected. Churches should have no other kind of pastor. Today, however, some Southern Baptists are warning the churches against them. This is a mammoth historical irony that many find difficult to appreciate.

The Charleston Association in its adoption of the 1689 Confession and in the preaching of such men as Oliver Hart, Richard Furman, Basil Manly, Sr., bequeathed the theology of the fathers to James P. Boyce. In his analysis of the doctrine of perseverance of the saints, Boyce wrote,

This doctrine is inseparably associated with the other doctrines of grace which we have found taught in God’s word. So true is this, that they are universally accepted, or rejected together. The perseverance of the saints is a part of every Calvinistic confession. . . . All the evidence, therefore, of the truth of the doctrines already examined, may be presented in favour of this which is a necessary inference from them. In like manner, all the independent proof of this doctrine confirms the separate doctrines, and the system of doctrine, with which it is associated.<sup>2</sup>

Boyce’s conviction at this point challenges the contemporary position of many Baptists who still maintain a doctrine of perseverance but separate

it from the rest of the system of which it is intrinsically a part. Those that have departed from the historic view, and the theologically consistent view, now warn churches against those that are true-blue, dyed in the wool, 100 proof Southern Baptist.

If pulpit committees and churches would look below the façade of scare-tactic accusations and warnings being rolled out like taffy at the Mississippi State Fair, they would discover something healthy and very desirable in the men and the message preached of those against whom they are warned. The twentieth-century slide into liberalism rode on the back of a growing indifference to the doctrines of grace, because the doctrines of grace are tied vitally to more biblical doctrines than just perseverance of the saints. The recovery of a fully salubrious evangelical preaching ministry depends largely on the degree to which the doctrines of grace are recovered and become the consciously propagated foundation of all gospel truth.

If a church, therefore, gets a Calvinist preacher, she will get a good thing. Several issues will be settled forever and the church will not have to wonder about the soundness of her preacher on these items of biblical truth and their soul-nurturing power. Calvinists have stood for more than just their distinguishing doctrines, but have held steadfastly to other doctrines that are essential for the health of Baptist churches in our day. Let's look at a few of these.

**A Calvinist firmly believes in the divine inspiration of Scriptures.** A large number of cogent defenses of the inerrancy of Scripture have been written by Calvinists. Some would say that these are among the most profound ever produced in Christian literature. Calvinism provides a more consistent rationale for inerrancy than any other theological system. One of the most often repeated objections to the divine inspiration of Scripture is that its assumption of perfect divine control of the process runs roughshod over human freedom. Virtually every defender of inerrancy has to discuss the relation between inspiration and human freedom. The Calvinist system poses no contradiction between the freeness of human personality and verbal inspiration. God's particular providence over all events includes every choice of every moral creature without diminishing the free moral agency of the creature. Through the use of a variety of means, God works all things, including inspiration, "according to the counsel of His own will" (Ephesians 1:11). In the same way that God's sovereignty brings about the fulfillment of His prophecies according to His decree with no violation of human freedom, so He inspired Scripture without suspending the individual personality traits of every biblical writer. If a church gets a

Calvinist pastor, she can be sure that her pastor never will deny the full truthfulness of the Bible.

**A Calvinist firmly believes the biblical doctrine of the Trinity.** Calvinistic Baptists have been among the most ardent defenders of the doctrine of the Trinity. As an example of a viewpoint that could be multiplied several times over, Benjamin Keach in his exposition of the Covenant of Redemption noted strongly, “In this Covenant there is a clear Revelation or Manifestation of the Three Persons in the Deity, and their Glory doth equally and jointly shine forth.”<sup>3</sup> John L. Dagg likewise concurred when he stated, “In the work of salvation, the divine persons co-operate in different offices; and these are so clearly revealed, as to render the personal distinction in the Godhead more manifest, than it is in any other of God’s works.”<sup>4</sup>

Calvinists believe that their perception of salvation has an intrinsic dependence on the Trinity as is manifest in no other theological system. They believe the doctrines of grace are themselves a manifestation of the necessary co-equality of the persons in the Trinity. That which is intrinsic to the glory of one person of the Trinity necessarily involves the glory of the other persons. Each person sustains a relation to the “eternal covenant” (Hebrews 13:20) that is most revelatory of His eternal relation within the Trinity. All the works of God involve Trinitarian operation. So it is true of creation, providence and redemption in all its multi-faceted excellence. What the Father knows, the Son knows and the Spirit knows. What the Father decrees, the Son decrees, and the Spirit decrees. That which the Father desires to effect, the Son desires to effect, and the Spirit desires to effect. The scheme of redemption in particular manifests the equality of the three persons of the Trinity in each of these ideas but at the same time shows the eternal distinctions of person. The Father elected, the Son in obedience to the will of the Father procured, and the Spirit, honoring the will of the Father and the obedience of the Son, effects in the personal experience of the elect person. Because every aspect of salvation requires one of infinite power and glory to bring it about, Calvinism rests its soteriology on the doctrine of the Trinity. If a church gets a Calvinist pastor, she will never have to worry that he will deny the doctrine of the Trinity.

**A Calvinist firmly believes the doctrine of substitutionary atonement.** Central to the gospel is the atoning work of Christ. Scripture witness makes it abundantly clear that Christ in His death has taken on Himself the penalty of our sins. “He Himself bore our sins in His own body on the

tree,” Peter says (1 Peter 2:24). Calvinists, virtually without exception affirm in the strongest terms this clearly biblical presentation of the death of Christ. Oliver Hart, for example, in speaking of the way in which Christ as mediator has made intercession for transgressors argued, “This he did not by laboring to extenuate their crimes, but by offering himself as their sponsor, to stand in their room and stead; bear their sins; make an atonement for their guilt, restore to the law its honor, and answer the demands of justice.”<sup>5</sup>

It is no surprise that this view lends itself to the conclusion that the atonement was either by design or by nature effectual only for the elect. It is this very particularity, in fact, that renders the atonement necessarily substitutionary. Substitutionary involves effectuality and particularity. If the death of Jesus genuinely removed the judicial verdict against sin, then who among those from whom the judicial verdict has been removed will suffer its penalty? Because of this connection, many that do not hold to a definite effectual atonement remain open to other options concerning Christ’s death. Some adopt a moral influence theory, others a governmental theory, others a victory theory and others a martyr theory. Though each of these has a degree of applicatory truth in their formulation, their true power is borrowed from the central motif of substitution. The Calvinist has the greatest stake in maintaining the biblical view of Christ’s suffering in such a way as to redeem, reconcile, forgive sinners. “If we died with Him, we shall live with Him” (2 Timothy 2:11). A Calvinist pastor will always proclaim a substitutionary atonement.

**A Calvinist firmly believes in religious liberty.** Isaac Backus wrote his massive *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Baptists* as a defense and explanation of Baptist life as orthodox, growing, Calvinistic and thoroughly committed to religious liberty. Add to Backus the names of Obadiah Holmes, John Clarke and John Leland and one has a hefty collection of Baptists that argued for and suffered for religious liberty. They also would agree with John Leland, who said that “Christ did, before the foundation of the world, predestinate a certain number of the human family for his bride” and that, therefore, “Jesus died for his elect sheep only” and would call them effectually and would keep them by his power to “bring them safe to glory.”<sup>6</sup> Because of this, Leland also believed, “Every man must give an account of himself to God, and therefore every man ought to be at liberty to serve God in that way that he can best reconcile it to his conscience.”<sup>7</sup>

The rationale for this position, beyond the fact that the Bible assumes its truthfulness, is clearly Calvinistic. Because of the fall, the human will is in bondage; only the effectual call of God can open the heart to believe. God is determined that all His elect shall come and no power of hell can keep Him from saving His elect and thus building His church. In order, therefore, to build a church of living stones with a principle of holiness as their driving motivation, one must eliminate all factors of external coercion. God builds His church through the preaching of His called and sent ministers, and not through government sponsorship or carnal intervention. If a church has a Calvinist pastor, she has a man that believes strongly in religious liberty.

**A Calvinist firmly believes in missions and evangelism.** John L. Dagg was one of the most respected men in Baptist life until his death in 1884 when he was over ninety years old. His books of theology, apologetics and ethics gained wide distribution among Southern Baptists. His theology text was the first used to teach Southern Baptist ministerial students at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina. Broadus remarked that his theology was “remarkable for clear statement of the profoundest truths, and for devotional sweetness.” Dagg gives expression to a warm evangelical Calvinism throughout his *Manual of Theology*. As a corollary, he argued that God’s character requires evangelism and His promises render its success certain.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, in his *Manual of Church Order*, Dagg wrote, “Every Christian is bound to do what he can for the conversion of others, and for spreading the knowledge of truth,” but this call falls especially on the gospel minister who has been especially prepared and called, a call that includes a “sincere desire to glorify God, and save souls.”<sup>9</sup> In a section on the “Duty of Baptists” Dagg asserted, “It is our duty to labor faithfully and perseveringly to bring all men to the knowledge of the truth.” He affirmed that the great commission “requires us to preach the gospel to every creature; and we ought to be foremost in obeying it.” He pointed to the far-reaching consequences of the obedience of William Carey and the English Baptists as well as the providential conversion of Judson and Rice to be regarded as “as a special call of God on American Baptists to labor for the spread of the gospel throughout the earth.”<sup>10</sup>

Calvinists believe that God accomplishes His decrees in ways consistent with His character. They are no less committed, therefore, to evangelistic preaching than they are to the necessity of the incarnation. Christ’s fervency for the glory of His Father in descending to earth is the model for our fervency in preaching this good news. The Son of God came down

from heaven because appropriate means consistent with the glory of God followed of necessity the decree of salvation. He commanded that repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached in the world for the same reason. No atonement, no forgiveness; no preaching, no repentance and faith. When one objected that election precludes evangelism, Dagg responded “The objection to election applies equally to every part of the divine purpose, and proceeds on the supposition that God has predetermined the end without reference to the means by which it is to be accomplished.”<sup>11</sup> When a church has a Calvinist preacher, she has a preacher that is committed to persuasive preaching and witnessing as God’s ordained means to bring sinners to faith in Christ.

**A Calvinist firmly believes in Christ-centered preaching.** Baptist Calvinists have been clear and consistent in their Christ centered emphasis. Every Christian knows the glory of Christ and sees in Scripture and feels in his soul the pre-eminence of Christ as the avenue to salvation and the glory of God. Richard Fuller, James, Boyce, Charles Spurgeon, Basil Manly, Sr., Oliver Hart, and myriads of others glory in the preaching of Christ crucified. Each of these would agree with Spurgeon who preached,

If I preach Christ I must preach him as the covenant head of his people, and how far am I then from the doctrine of election? If I preach Christ I must preach the efficacy of his blood, and how far am I removed then from the great doctrine of an effectual atonement? If I preach Christ I must preach the love of his heart, and how can I deny the final perseverance of the saints? If I preach the Lord Jesus as the great Head and King, how far am I removed from divine sovereignty? Must I not, if I preach Christ personally, preach his doctrines?”<sup>12</sup>

Baptist Calvinists affirm a christocentric revelation and gospel because that is the emphasis of Scripture. If the Calvinist properly understands Paul’s affirmation that our calling is in accord with God’s own purpose and grace given us in Christ Jesus before the world began (2 Timothy 1:9) and that He has given us all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, the proper response is to drive every message toward Christ. The Father’s purpose of glorifying Himself is Christ-centered and the Spirit’s work of drawing sinners to salvation is the same as drawing them to Christ. If any would see God glorified and sinners saved then the preacher’s exposition must lead to Christ, the one in whom the fullness of the Godhead

dwells in bodily form. Election can not save apart from Christ; irresistible grace cannot save without establishing union with Christ; Christ's death was fully effectual because of who He was. The Calvinist believes that God operates by means that are consistent with His character, and the only one in whom salvation resides in a way consistent with the character of God is in Christ.<sup>13</sup> If a church has a Calvinist as a preacher, she has a preacher that will consistently and joyfully preach Christ in the fullness of his saving power.

**A Calvinist firmly believes in holiness of life.** When John A. Broadus wrote in his *Catechism of Bible Teaching*, "The only sure proof of being a true believer is growing in holiness and usefulness even to the end," he merely stated in shortened form what Calvinistic Baptist theologians and preachers had been saying since the seventeenth century. Benjamin Keach argued strongly for the necessity of holiness as naturally concomitant to justification. "[W]here justification is, there is also sanctification; a man is not sanctified that is not justified, nor are any actually justified that are not sanctified." John Gill, sometimes falsely reputed as an antinomian and thus an enemy to holiness, showed the true tendency of the Calvinist view of redemption by contending, "Redemption is a deliverance from sin, from all sin, original and actual; and that not only from the guilt of sin, and the punishment due unto it; but in consequence of redeeming grace, the redeemed ones are delivered from the dominion and governing power of sin, and at last from the being of it. Christ saves his people from their sins; he does not indulge them in them."<sup>14</sup> True effectual grace produces true love for, pursuit of, and increasing attainment of true holiness.

For the Calvinist, the divine purpose in election, atonement and effectual calling, is the gathering of a people zealous of good works (Titus 2:13, 14). Because regeneration is an immediate and sovereign operation of God, it alters the affections and necessarily gives rise to hatred of sin and remorse for it. The new heart embraces Christ and His righteousness and then seeks to practice righteousness because Christ is righteous (1 John 3:7). The Calvinistic Baptist, in a way consistent with his system, expects holiness in increasing measure in all the people of God.

**A Calvinist firmly believes in regenerate church membership.** The *Summary of Church Discipline* of the Charleston Association said that "a particular gospel church consists of a company of saints incorporated by a special covenant into one distinct body." It is not to be built "with dead but living materials. None have a right to church membership, but such as

Christ will own as his sincere followers at the last decisive day.” An article that appeared in the *Baptist Record* in 1882 and reprinted in the *Christian Index* examined the anxious bench method of evangelism and found it as a whole “pernicious.” The abuse connected with this system has “resulted in grievous injury to out churches by filling them with an unconverted membership” and is a major reason “why our efficiency as a denomination is not commensurate with our numerical strength.”<sup>15</sup>

One need never fear that a Baptist who is a Calvinist will go lightly on this Baptist distinctive of regenerate church membership. The gradual compromise of the ideal of regenerate church membership as indicated by our deceitful numbers has coincided with the loss of two practices essential for maintaining this distinctive; one, care in receiving members, and two, care in maintaining spiritual health in the entire congregation through close attention to both formative and corrective discipline. If a church has a Calvinist as pastor, she has one that will seek earnestly to maintain the New Testament principle of regenerate church membership.

## Conclusion

A Calvinist pastor will never manipulate his people but will always seek to motivate them by truth and an increasingly clear vision of the glory of God. He will know that his ministry is not to be built on deceit, nor guile, nor flattering words, nor is he to use his influence as a cloak for covetousness, but because he has a stewardship of the gospel, he speaks, not as pleasing men, but God (1 Thessalonians 2:1–5). Churches, you should seriously consider, for the sake of your souls and the glory of God, calling as your next pastor a historic Baptist Calvinist. As Boyce said, they make “good and effective preachers.” 🐾

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> J. P. Boyce, “The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,” *The Western Recorder* (14 July 1866), 2.

<sup>2</sup> J. P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006; first published 1887), 428.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Keach, *The Everlasting Covenant, A Sweet Cordial for a Drooping Soul* (London: printed for H. Barnard, 1693), 24.

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857; reprint ed., Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Press, 1982) 254.

<sup>5</sup> Oliver Hart, “Christ, The Mediator,” *Minutes of the Philadelphia Baptist Association from 1707 to 1807* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 186.

<sup>6</sup> John Leland, *Writings of John Leland*, ed. L. E. Greene (New York: Arno Press, 1969) 625.

<sup>7</sup> John Leland, *Rights of Conscience* in Robert A Baker, *A Baptist Sourcebook* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 40.

<sup>8</sup> Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 315–17, et al.

<sup>9</sup> John L. Dagg, *Manual of Church Order* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858), 243, 245.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 302, 303.

<sup>11</sup> Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, 315.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1961), 1861: 174.

<sup>13</sup> B. B. Warfield, a non-Baptist Calvinist, sets forth the Christ-centeredness of Scripture as a striking evidence of its inspiration. “Another point in which the unity of the bible is strikingly apparent needs our attention next: amid all the diversity of its subject-matter, it may yet be said that almost the whole book is taken up with the *portraiture of one person*. On its first page he comes for a moment before our astonished eyes; on the last he lingers still before their adoring gaze. And from that first word in Genesis which describes him as the ‘seed of the woman’ and at the same time her deliverer—with occasional moments of absence, just as the principal character of a play is not always on the stage, and yet with constant development of character—to the end, where he is discovered sitting on the great white throne and judging the nations, the one consistent but gradually developed portraiture grows before our eyes. Not a false stroke is made. Every touch of the pencil is placed just where it ought to stand as part of the whole. There is nowhere the slightest trace of wavering or hesitancy of hand. The draughtsman is certainly a consummate artist. And, as the result of it all, the world is possessed of the strongest, most consistent, most noble literary portraiture to be found in all her literature.” Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *Works*, 1:438.

<sup>14</sup> John Gill, *Collection*, 1:10.

<sup>15</sup> *Christian Index*, November 9, 1882, 1.

# Younger Evangelicals And a Restlessness for Revival

*Christian George*

Revival is brewing in our land. Younger evangelicals across America are digging deeply into the things of God. As evidenced by the insatiable hunger for God-centered theology, expressed by John Piper and J. I. Packer, among others, college students and twentysomethings are gravitating toward the writings of Puritan divines such as Jonathan Edwards, Richard Baxter and John Bunyan. We are tired of treading theological water. It's time to go deeper. It's time to recover a sense of the sovereignty of God.

In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, Baptists across the board emphasized missions to the exclusion of serious doctrinal teaching. As a result, a generation of children has grown up in the church without receiving solid, biblical, exegetical instruction. Across the board, Baptist sermons were typically topical in structure, Christian camp leaders merely scratched the theological surface, and the holiest thing we talked about in Sunday school was the white-powdered doughnut that drew us there.

I am a product of this phenomenon, a twenty-six-year-old Baptist who is excited about the revival breaking out across college campuses and church youth groups. There is a new breed of Baptists, a younger generation who is learning from Baptist heroes like Charles Spurgeon and William Carey. We are returning to substantial study of God and a serious inquiry of personal holiness. With vigorous enthusiasm, we are wiping off our spiritual milk mustaches and helping ourselves to a tender cut of Christological cuisine.

## A Higher View of God

A. W. Tozer, a prophetic writer and thinker of the last century, wrote that religion rises only as high as its view of God.<sup>1</sup> A low view of God leads to a low view of worship. My generation was always told that we were special. If we picked up a spoon, we were special. If we went to the bathroom, we were special. It didn't matter what our IQ or grades were, we were special anyway. Girls grew up thinking they were princesses; boys

thought they were princes. When we were thirsty we screamed. When we were hungry we yelled. Every person existed to rock our cribs and kiss our heads. The whole world revolved around us—our needs, our wants and our rights. Since royalty gets whatever it wants, we became convinced that we were the center of the universe.

As we matured physically, our spiritual lives remained in infancy. We thought we were the center of our salvation, the highlight of our hymns, and how lucky of God to serve us. But the more we glean from Puritan works like Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* and Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*, we learn that the world doesn't revolve around us any more than the sun revolves around the moon. Before we were ever created, God found pleasure in Himself. He was completely complete without us and our view of God is changing—we have thought too lowly of Him all along.

Worship is not about us. It's not about the love we feel when we love the way we love God. Yes, we are important to God, important enough to die for. But younger evangelicals are reacting against a man-centered approach to ministry. It's no wonder seventy percent of college students drop out of church during their freshman year and join college ministries like University Christian Fellowship and Reformed University Fellowship. We don't have to make Jesus sexy anymore. Against the backdrop of a church that looks like the world in order to draw the world into the church, we are ready to embrace the true identity of Christianity as expressed by our interaction with the world and our separation from the world.

Younger evangelicals are discovering that true worship is about God—His passions and interests. It's about His power and pleasure. Reality exists for Him. We exist for Him. And when our lives are tuned to His praise, when we readjust our thinking, we find freedom in focusing our gaze on something greater than ourselves. It is a dangerous thing to tempt a powerful God, and we are learning to love the God who revolves around Himself.

When Christianity first took root in the first century, pagan temples in Alexandria and other cities used technology to bring people into the shrines. Sophisticated machines that made thunder and opened doors dazzled the world and instilled fear into the people for the gods. But Christians have no need for these things. Jesus once said, "And I, as I am lifted up from the earth, will attract everyone to Me" (John 12:32).<sup>2</sup> The problem that Paul experienced in Corinth, and our problem today in the Baptist church is that Jesus Christ is not lifted up. We build Him gyms, throw Him concerts, but fail to exalt His name. He isn't trusted as the marvelous

magnet and in many churches he's still lying in the tomb, wrapped in linens and waiting to be warmed.

But the Scriptures paint Him in another light. Jesus Christ is the great warrior who grabbed the dragon's tail and slammed him down to earth. He is the loving shepherd who tears wild bears apart when they threaten His flock. And unlike Samson, there are no Kryptonite scissors to drain His power. When John was on the Isle of Patmos, he saw a mighty vision of Christ: "Then I saw heaven open wide—and oh! a white horse and its rider. The rider, named Faithful and True, judges and makes war in pure righteousness. His eyes are a blaze of fire, on his head many crowns" (Revelation 19:11–12). Christ is the Mighty Rock of Ages who pulls us into the center of salvation. He governs the actions of our lives and everything on the syllabus of salvation happened just the way He wrote it. Younger evangelicals are developing a higher view of God and we are learning that the most seeker friendly strategy a church can implement is the elevation and exaltation of Jesus Christ.

### Another Look at Sovereignty

What does it mean for God to be sovereign? I asked a youth group this question once and was shocked by the response. A guy in the back of the room said, "It means that God can do whatever the h\_\_ He wants." I grinned. "Yeah, that's one way to put it." But he had a point. The owner has the right to throw away the inventory, and God wouldn't have lost an ounce of glory if the Great Flood had destroyed everyone, including Noah. But God in His grace *became* the inventory to purchase our lives with His blood. The Creator became the creation, and according to Revelation 13:8, in the mind of God Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross before the world was spinning on its axis. The veil of the Temple that once separated us from God's presence has been torn in two, and both prostitute and peasant have access into the Holy of Holies.

Paul told the Corinthian church, "In the Messiah, in Christ, God leads us from place to place in one perpetual victory parade. Through us, He brings knowledge of Christ. Everywhere we go, people breathe in the exquisite fragrance. Because of Christ, we give off a sweet scent rising to God, which is recognized by those on the way of salvation" (2 Corinthians 2:14–15). My own spiritual life often smells like a rat and not a rose. But in His love, God accepts our praise and hears our prayers. He accomplishes His perfect plan in spite of our rebellion. God is the author, editor and publisher of our lives. In Him we are written, re-written and distributed to

a world that needs the good news of the gospel of Christ. But a day is coming when the Lord will reclaim His library books and Christ will return to earth, not as a Servant but as a King.

The gospel is an offensive animal. It tears apart pride and tells us we are fundamentally corrupted. It shreds independence, rips open chest cavities and replaces hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. It even slices through skulls and exchanges worldly minds for minds of Christ.

Every Christian is a theologian. We don't need a beard, a pipe and a library to think about God. In fact, everyone has a theology. Some people think God doesn't exist—that's a theology. Others think if He did exist we couldn't know Him—that's a theology too. Every action is based on a theology. At the end of the day, our theology of God exists for our relationship with God. Our thoughts about God lead us into a deeper worship of God. And a day is coming when the Great King will separate wheat from chaff, sheep from goats, saved from lost. But those who love God with head and heart will be ushered into eternity.

When I was a young boy, my father taught me to play racquetball. Now racquetball is a game of angles, speed and wit. Being a scrawny kid, I walked onto the court and no matter how many times I swung at the ball, young David could not defeat Goliath. With great patience, my dad served the ball. I swung and missed, swung and missed—hundreds of times—swinging and missing. One day, perhaps by sheer coincidence, I actually hit the ball back. It shocked me and produced a large purple welt on my father's thigh.

The older I grew, the harder he served the ball. What once was soft now was slammed, and I continued to swing and miss, swing and miss. The game got faster, the shots trickier, and I progressed in my skill. Little did I know that all my dad had to do was turn up the heat and I would be left in the dust. These days, his arthritis has shown favor on me and I'm paying him back for all those embarrassing years of ball whiffing. But every once in a while I'll see a twinkle in his eye, and he'll reduce me to a five-year-old boy swinging a racket that was as big as me.

It's good to have a father who controls the game. I remember seeing a painting in a European museum where God was playing the devil at a game of chess. God was apparently losing, the devil had a huge smile on his skeleton face, and the title of the painting was "Check-mate." I stood there, puzzled by the picture. Could it be true? Is God susceptible to defeat?

Satan thought so. Pilate had Jesus beaten, flogged and tortured. In the ultimate game of chess, it looked like God was losing. As Christ embraced the nails, the crown of thorns and the crucifixion, God bent down. He bent

down not with a spirit of sweetness, but with a whip of wrath. No dove descended that day when the Father crushed His Son for our sins. Hell was unleashed on Him. But what the devil didn't know was that God had one more move. And on the third day, Jesus Christ was raised to life and the devil was laid to rest, and with His holy hand God used His one more move to prove his all time love.

That is why we can sing with Martin Luther, "The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure, one little word shall fell him."<sup>3</sup> The monster we fight is a crippled creature. He is a vampire without fangs, a werewolf without claws, and a dragon without fire. We shouldn't flinch at him because Christ has crushed the head of the serpent, as predicted in Genesis 3:15. While his body still slithers, the creature has a massive concussion and will one day be thrown into the lake of fire.

### Chopsticks and Praise Songs

Years ago, I attended a Baptist church in my city for the first time. Several friends told me that it was the hip, new church in the area, so I went to see it for myself. As I sang the praise music, I noticed a theme threaded throughout the service—the songs had nothing to do with God. Some of the tunes described the Christian life; others contained verses about struggles and temptations. Still others included a "pull yourself up by the boot straps" message. It was a Sunday morning I'll never forget because I was struggling with a sin I couldn't shake. So there I stood, singing songs about how I can pull myself out of my problems while my soul was craving a worship experience that would take the focus off my abilities and placed it on God's glory. Only God could lift me from my mire and yet I left the sanctuary that day disgusted and dirty from digging in my own self-centeredness.

Chopsticks are made from many materials—bamboo, plastic, bone, jade and ivory, and it's been rumored that silver chopsticks were used in the Chinese imperial palace for the detection of poison in the Emperor's meal. If the food was poisoned, the chopsticks would blacken when the poison encountered the silver. And someone usually lost his life because of it. Christian music needs a Chinese chopstick test.

These days, many new hymns are being written for the church. Contemporary Christian music and praise choruses are springing up in churches throughout the world and are being used in corporate worship. While hymns are generally sung *about* God, and praise songs are sung *to* God, we

must remember that Christian music will always be changing. Its beat, rhythm and melody may alter, but there are some things that should never be abandoned—its faithfulness to biblical doctrines, theology and God-centeredness. These are the non-negotiables of Christian music and must be written in Sharpie. Other elements can be sketched in pencil.

While many Baptist churches are abandoning traditional hymns in hopes of reaching the new generation, ironically, the new generation is going back to the classics. We see through the repetitious emptiness of theologically absent choruses and are craving the old stuff, the Christ-oriented stuff. We are learning that worship is giving to God what He has already given to us. We give Him our heads and hands—we know Him, love Him and serve Him. But when worship revolves around us, when music has little if any God-centeredness, our praise becomes unbalanced. We become a two-headed monster, exalting God with one breath while applauding ourselves with the other. This makes us spiritually schizophrenic and with Paul we confess, “Yes, I’m full of myself—after all, I’ve spent a long time in sin’s prison. What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise” (Romans 7:15). When we worship ourselves, sinless Jekyll becomes unholy Hyde.

Music finds its primary purpose in the worship of God. I’m a sucker for all kinds of music—blues, jazz, classical and some Reggae here and there. And I love all the uses of music—entertainment, relaxation and therapy. But music finds ultimate significance in the adoration of its creator. While the psalmist does say, “Sing God a brand-new song” (Psalm 96:1), there’s nothing wrong with the old ones. Some of the greatest hymns of the faith were written when the United States was still in diapers. In 1739, Charles Wesley wrote these words:

And can it be that I should gain  
An interest in the Savior’s blood?  
Died He for me, who caused His pain?  
For me, who Him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Tis mystery all, the Immortal dies;  
Who can explore this strange design?  
In vain the first-born seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love divine.

Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
Let angel minds inquire no more.

He left his father's throne above,  
So free, so infinite His grace;  
Emptied himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's helpless race;  
Tis mercy all, immense and free;  
O praise my God, it reaches me.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free;  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in Him is mine!  
Alive in Him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine.  
Behold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

This song packs a powerful theological punch. It is loaded with spiritual truths and insights into the life we have in Jesus. It takes seriously the depravity of humanity and the sovereign power of Christ to free us from spiritual slavery. Just because a hymn is old does not mean it should be discarded for it, too, was once new. On the flip side, just because a hymn is new doesn't mean it's worth singing. The quality of a song is found in its content. Examine this modern hymn, "In Christ Alone," written by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty:

In Christ alone my hope is found;  
He is my light, my strength, my song;  
This cornerstone, this solid ground,  
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.  
What heights of love, what depths of peace,  
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!

My comforter, my all in all—  
Here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone, who took on flesh,  
Fullness of God in helpless babe!  
This gift of love and righteousness,  
Scorned by the ones He came to save.  
Till on that cross as Jesus died,  
The wrath of God was satisfied;  
For every sin on Him was laid—  
Here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground His body lay,  
Light of the world by darkness slain;  
Then bursting forth in glorious day,  
Up from the grave He rose again!  
And as He stands in victory,  
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me;  
For I am His and He is mine—  
Bought with the precious blood of Christ.

No guilt in life, no fear in death—  
This is the power of Christ in me;  
From life's first cry to final breath,  
Jesus commands my destiny.  
No power of hell, no scheme of man,  
Can ever pluck me from His hand;  
Till He returns or calls me home—  
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.<sup>4</sup>

This song doesn't just scratch the surface. In this hymn Jesus Christ is the theme. His saving work on the cross is adored and His power to keep us from hell magnified. Songs like these revere the God who sits highly upon His throne while mortals are kept humbly before His feet.

### Return to Mystery

Of primary importance to a renewed interest in theology is an honest look at original sin, radical grace and childlike faith. The apostle Paul said that before we were made alive in Christ we were dead in our sins (Ro-

mans 5:10). We were zombies, dead and decaying yet active and hostile. But Christ engaged us in strange combat. We swung at God, our hollow eyes fixed on Him. We screeched in His face and wrapped our arms around Him, throwing fists at His head. Though God could have put bullets in our brains (that's the only way to kill a zombie), he chose to remove the obstacles between us. Day by day, hour by hour, he opened our affections and pinned our elbows, swirling us around with beautiful force. Like a kung fu master, He wrapped us up.

C. S. Lewis was right, "Every story of conversion is a story of blessed defeat."<sup>5</sup> For years we struggled against God, denying His existence, avoiding His churches and hating His followers. But at last, when our own strength failed, our numb limbs began to tingle and our hearts were strangely warmed. And God gives grace to His gruesome monsters.

Even after we are saved, we grapple with God. We arm ourselves with pride, selfishness and disobedience. We purchase the metal of materialism and coat ourselves with the shield of independence. Yet God is no stranger to combat and His Holy Spirit convicts us with arrows that find the weak places in our armor. Christians are torn creatures. While our bodies decay, God has awakened another force within us, a passion for purity. We fight our old temptations with new desires—desires for holiness. It is this quest that urges us to know Him fully, serve Him faithfully and love Him with every ounce of our existence.

As we engage the Scriptures, we grapple with its truths. How do we reconcile the differences between the Gospels and the apparent contradictions throughout the Scripture? How can Jesus be in heaven, yet we eat His flesh and drink His blood on earth? How long was Jesus really in the tomb? Did Judas hang himself or did his intestines explode at the bottom of a cliff?

Not long ago, western civilization prided itself on its scientific knowledge. Darwin's new theory hit the press, railways were being laid throughout the world, and electricity sparked great ideas in the minds of those like Thomas Edison. The Christian community basked in this newly enlightened age and sought to understand the Bible in those terms. While great energy was spent exploring the Old and New Testaments, biblical scholars attempted to view God's Word through scientific lenses. They reduced the miracles and mysteries of the Scripture to folklores and myths because they couldn't reproduce or understand them.

Karl Barth (1886–1968), one of the most prominent theologians of the twentieth century, was schooled in this system of thought and violently opposed it. At the end of his life, after years of preaching and teaching,

Barth was asked to summarize his theology in once sentence. After thinking for a moment, he said, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tell me so.”

There are still remnants of the historical-critical movement in our universities and college campuses. Professors, trained in disemboweling the Bible, divorce personal devotion to Christ from academic biblical scholarship. In Baptist colleges across America, they plant seeds of doubt in the minds and hearts of those seeking the true purpose and meaning of Scripture. Modern scholarship, however, is showing that such thinking is exhausted, dehydrated and outdated.

Nevertheless, we do grapple with the mysteries of the Bible. Did a great fish really eat Jonah? How could Jonah have survived three days surrounded by sin and seaweed? When I was a kid I really couldn’t figure this out. I thought it was just a fairytale like Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. But I remember a Baptist preacher saying to me, “Christian, do you believe God could make a whale?” I nodded. “And do you think God could make a man?” Again I nodded. “Then why can’t God put them together when He wants to?”

For years I’ve pondered his words. If I really believed that God can work His providential power and create matter from nothing, I should have no problem when He wants to bend His rules. God is not limited even by His own ordinances and when I question God’s ability to perform miracles, my own salvation comes into question. For that is the greatest miracle of all.

In college, I often struggled to reconcile the differences among the four Gospels. I studied every text that seemed contradictory and read endless commentaries. But one day I remember walking through the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam, Holland. Van Gogh was the son of a preacher and an expert of impressionism (Impressionism is a style of art that portrays reality through the expression of light). He mixed colors in fascinating ways and reproduced landscapes with great skill. As I walked by his colorful work, I passed fields of wheat crunched beneath clouds of pink and purple. I saw tree trunks twisting from their roots to branches that forked the swirling sky. And I remember examining a series of paintings. The subject remained the same, but each scene was painted during a different time of day. For example, a rock painted in the morning looked very different in the evening. The scenery of these paintings didn’t change, but the shadows, colors and hues did.

All four Gospel writers painted the life of Jesus Christ in different lights. In their own unique ways they emphasized different aspects of

His life because they were writing to different audiences. Matthew paints Christ in the morning. He begins with a long genealogy and birth story. Mark paints Christ in the afternoon. He takes no time to sketch the early years, but hits the ground running at the white-hot height of Christ's ministry. Luke paints Christ in the evening. It is the longest Gospel, coupled with Acts, meticulously portraying the Last Supper and the evening in the Garden of Gethsemane. John paints Christ in the midnight. When all the world was dark with sin and doubt, Jesus pierced the blackness and showed Himself as the light and hope of humanity. On its own, each Gospel appears isolated and disconnected, but when viewed together, as the Holy Spirit delivered them to us, they represent a multidimensional picture of the life of Jesus, a three dimensional portrait of His nature. And such a work of art demands our response.

Younger evangelicals take seriously the primacy of Scripture—the greatest love story ever told. It is a divine valentine licked, sealed and stamped by the power of the Holy Spirit and it speaks with great clarity to us today. "I have loved you, says the Lord" (Malachi 1:2, NIV). What kind of love is this? It is a former love, a past tense love, a love that saw every sin, every lie. Yet it is also a frequent and a future love, continually disciplining and washing us in the light of His glory and grace.

Okay, a confession—I am hungry for hardware, starving for software and completely intoxicated with upgrading. Maybe it's my high-tech generation. Maybe it's the media's fault for whetting my appetite with gigabytes and gadgets. I know I'm not alone—young Baptists are becoming quite the bloggers of late. Perhaps it's a power issue. The more stuff we own, the more control we have over life. The better the G.P.S, the calmer we feel in the middle of an empty interstate. Whatever the reason, the result is undeniable—we are digitizing ourselves to death.

But there is something spiritual, something biblical about downgrading in an upgrading culture. Our society does not look favorably on child-like faith, a faith that closes its eyes and falls into the invisible arms of God. Yet, our belief in the sovereignty of God to create and recreate us sustains our hope and keeps our faith simple enough for God to enjoy.

Christians are God's boomerangs. He formed us in the womb, throws us in the world, and bends us back to Himself. Since our pilgrimages start and end with God, He becomes the apple of our eyes. He is the center of our thoughts, deeds, music and worship. When we fall in love with God, sin no longer satisfies us. We are given taste buds for a different kind of food—a heavenly kind. And we are no longer satisfied with kissing our Creator with the veil between our lips.

## A Gory Gospel

My generation is a product of postmodernism. We are constantly taught that if there is truth, we cannot perfectly know it. Relativism is also the god of our age. It says that your interpretation of truth is no better than mine. Still worse is deconstructionism that says, “It’s not that I don’t know truth; it’s that I just don’t care.” These three mindsets are not only tolerated in our culture, they are taught. Ironically, the only thing that’s not tolerated is the person who claims that there is only one way to find absolute truth.

But younger evangelicals are standing for the truth found in Christ even though it’s not popular. The current landscape of Christianity is rolling with all kinds of deviations of biblical truth. Younger evangelicals are swimming in a sea of competing thoughts. We are resisting the enticements of prosperity gospel preachers, emergent church leaders, and higher critical scholars who demythologize the Scriptures. We are upholding the tenants of biblical orthodoxy and are recovering a heightened view of Christ’s atonement.

In his book *Virtual Faith*, Tom Beaudoin suggested that the baby boomer generation has been very quick to gloss over the crucifixion of Christ and go straight to the victory and hope of the resurrection. Younger evangelicals, however, are slowing down to re-examine the suffering of Christ.<sup>6</sup> We want to study the reality of the brutality. We seek a closer look at the nails that split the God-Man’s tendons. And by examining the suffering of Christ, we discover how to be comforted in ours.

God became a baby to suffer with and for us—the Shepherd became the sheep. He didn’t have to do this. He could have abandoned our earth after we sinned and chosen another planet on which to accomplish His will. But with arms wide open He embraced the nails, the beatings and the bruises. For our sake He “knew pain firsthand” (Isaiah 53:3). Like a sponge, He absorbed the wrath that our sins provoked. And in the middle of His storm, when the sun had to look the other way, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned Me” (Matthew 27:46)?

Several years ago I took a pilgrimage to Romania. After a long drive through the Carpathian Mountains near Oradea, I entered a large cave filled with bats. It was dark and musty place, but there was enough light for me to see the stalagmites growing on the floor. They were narrow and tall, like fingers reaching up to touch the stalactites on the ceiling. Their dripping was eerie, but I inquired about the phenomenon. When mineralized water, mainly calcium carbonate, trickles from cavities in the ceiling of a cave, thin rings of calcite build upon one another. These rings eventu-

ally form a hollow tube that spans the height of the cave (stalactites also form on ceilings where there is a plumping leakage of limestone and other minerals).

Sliding my hand across a slippery rock, my thoughts turned upward. I thought grace. Humans are the recipients of divine dripping. The apostle John wrote, “This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that He loved us” (1 John 4:10). In the blackness of time, before there was time, God dripped His love onto us, creating us, forming us and shaping us. God connects us to Himself one drip at a time. It’s not our dripping that elevates us—gravity won’t allow that. But in His grace, God bends down to us and bring us to a place of contact. We touch the One who touches us and we confess with the psalmist, “He made creeks flow out from sheer rock, and water pour out like a river” (Psalm 78:16).

As we exited the Romanian cave, I felt a sting of disappointment. While the bats were certainly cool, deep down I wanted to see vampires. In Romanian folklore, bats are believed to be embodiments of evil spirits. The Romanian bat is smaller than its South American counterpart, but it is still considered dangerous by peasants throughout the country. According to myth expert Raymond McNally, “[Peasants] relate strange tales of people with bat wounds becoming demented and wishing to bite others.”<sup>7</sup> But I didn’t meet any of those people, and the closest thing I got to a bat bite was the rash I developed from the turtleneck (vampire protection).

Unlike Count Dracula who took blood, Jesus Christ offered His blood. He shed His blood for us that we might partake in His fellowship. By faith we “drink His blood” for life. Every time Christians gather for Holy Communion, we think of Christ’s words to His disciples, “This is my blood, God’s covenant, poured out for many people” (Mark 14:24).

Jesus Christ willingly shed His blood and died. His body was taken down from the cross and He was laid to rest in a tomb. After Jesus had been in the tomb for three days, the Father said, “My child, get up.” The Son was raised to life, and death itself was laid to rest. And the light of the world surfaced on the horizon, blinding vampires, demons and darkness. It is because of our Risen Savior we sing, “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Oh precious is that flow that makes me white as snow, no other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus.”<sup>8</sup>

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gory gospel. There was no anesthesia for Christ’s agony. There was no sedation for His suffering. This was the very reason He came to earth and He wanted to be fully sensitive to the

divine transaction. The Christian faith is not for the fainthearted. Sometimes we want to polish the cross and smooth out the splinters, but it took a gory gospel to wash away our dirty stains. And as Baptists we can sing with greater zeal, “There’s a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel’s vein, and sinner’s plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilt and shame.”<sup>9</sup>

## Back to the Future

The human body was made to move forward. Anatomically, our eyes are located in the front, our arms and elbows bend forward. Even our knee and ankle joints propel us ahead. Psychologically, we are encouraged to think and plan for the future—future finances, future investments and future career strategies. Bookshelves are bloated with books about how to find future mates in the near future. Religiously, we were also taught to focus on the future. No matter what we’ve done in the past, or how bad we’ve been to our friends, the future is what matters to God. Physically, intellectually and spiritually we are a forward-looking people.

But younger evangelicals are discovering that if our faith is to be healthy, we must look to the past before we look to the future. We must take a step back in order to take a step forward. We must go back to the Bible and the roots of our faith. We must rediscover the ancient doctrines, creeds and confessions that enrich our Christian heritage. We must listen to the hymns that history has sung for us long ago; sit under the teachings of the Council of Nicea, the Apostle’s Creed, and the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith. We must read the writings of St. Augustine, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon. Though these people have long since died, they still speak to us, instructing our faith and encouraging our lives. Only when we review the past can we preview the future.

A God-centered life goes against our grain. We want to be on top. We want to be the subject of the sentence. Yet throughout the history of Christianity, God has raised up individuals whose lives revolved around something greater than themselves. For Francois Fénelon, God was his ultimate fulfillment: “The more one loves God, the more one is content.”<sup>10</sup> For John Bunyan, God was always present: “Now was God and Christ continually before my face.”<sup>11</sup> And for Martin Luther, God was his true and only source of provision: “I have a rich Master who takes care of me while I am singing or sleeping.”<sup>12</sup> Younger evangelicals are mining riches from Christian history and are sitting at the feet of those who can point us, as John the Baptist did, to the God who wraps us in righteousness.

Christians need to know where we've been in order to know where we're going. We need to know about martyrs like Stephen, Peter and Paul. We need to know about Perpetua, John Huss and William Tyndale, for they, too, point us forward. They point beyond themselves, as John the Baptist did, to the Christ who laid down His life for His people and whose Crocs we are unworthy to unstrap. We have much to learn from those who were completely sold out to God, and whose testimonies encourage us to live as though we will live again.

The face of Christianity is currently undergoing plastic surgery, a face-lift in fact. The flesh of our faith is changing—the style of worship, the technology used and the songs that are sung. But we must never abandon the bone structure behind the skin—our belief in the unified-three-person God, our embrace of grace alone by faith alone in Christ alone, and our commitment to the supremacy of Holy Scripture and the sovereignty of God. These are non-negotiable for younger evangelicals. Everything else may change—the eyebrows, freckles, wrinkles and dimples—but the contours of our faith must not. The theology of the past must be minted to coins of the present. And by doing so, revival will sweep our society.

These days, there is an emerging interest in Jesus, but there is also a reaction against His church. People are crazy for Christ but want nothing to do with organized church. While this is a popular and widespread trend, we must be careful to keep the head of Christ attached to the body of Christ, lest we live a decapitated Christianity. God fulfills our desires for community by encouraging us to come together as a church and worship, foreshadowing the great gathering of God's people in heaven.

Knowing God is like peeling an onion. Day by day we unfold His blessings and excavate His mysteries. We encounter layers of love we never knew existed, levels of mercy that blow our minds away. Peel after peel, we uncover His attributes—graciousness, kindness, power and jealousy. We discover His glory and splendor. We agree with the psalmist that God “poured great draughts of water down parched throats; the starved and hungry got plenty to eat” (Psalm 107:9). After tasting the Lord's kindness, we get closer to the center of the Savior and find it full of sacrifice. And the whole peeling process, the whole salvation story, has made our eyes water with tears of humility and repentance.

The past has a way of supporting the present. Though invisible, the ancient ways push against us, reminding us of all the Christians that God upheld against the pressures of their day. The arms of God are strong, supporting us in times of turbulence. And no matter how disoriented we become, Christians lean against the Holy Spirit, the invisible One about

whom Jesus said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:8). And by leaning we learn the way of love.

My generation is craving robust theological teaching. We want to examine the Scriptures afresh and study the nature of Christ. We are embracing God’s glory as something sacred again. His name is heavier than we thought and loftier than we imagined. It is a name so holy that ancient scribes would bathe before writing it. We are hungry for the Holy and recognize our pilgrimage. With a burden on our backs, a Bible in our hands, and a city in our sight, we are blazing ahead, not as tourists or nomads, but as pilgrims who believe this world is a hotel and not a home. It is an airport terminal for those who have yet to board the plane. And one day, the gravel will turn to gold beneath our feet.

In his book *The Next Christendom*, Philip Jenkins observed that global Christianity is shifting to the southern hemisphere.<sup>13</sup> South America and Africa are exploding with revival while North America and Europe are declining in authentic faith. Having traveled throughout Europe, I can testify to this phenomenon. It seems to me like the church in America has a very important decision to make: Either we revive or we rot.

Either we get on our knees and pray that God will spark another awakening in our land, or we become irrelevant to global Christianity. The past reminds us that the Christians of cultures who obtained great prosperity became too comfortable and their faith disintegrated as their Christianity spread to areas of persecution and need. It has been a long time since the faith of our fathers was tested, and we, the new and naive generation, know very little of the sacrifice that comes from giving our lives to God.

Nevertheless, younger evangelicals are learning. The past is teaching us how to behave. We are going back in order to go forward, and we’re learning that it is costly to be a Christian. We are learning that true freedom comes from sacrifice, and obedience is more important than success. The way up is the way down, and darkness shows us Christ more than sunshine does. We are learning that God doesn’t make mistakes. He doesn’t call us to forget us. He doesn’t equip us to discard us. And the God who pulls us to Himself joins us for the journey.

You don’t have to be a writer to tell the story of Jesus. If you’re an artist, paint it. If you’re a singer, sing it. It doesn’t matter what you do or where you are, every one of us can point beyond ourselves. If you are in retail, tell us about the transaction of salvation. If you are a gardener, grow us a crown of thorns. Doctors can portray His physical pain and lawyers can describe our pardon.

In our nation's short history there have been two great awakenings. A third is rising in the water. Joe Church, a missionary to Africa, said, "Revival is not when the roof blows off, but when the bottom falls out."<sup>14</sup> The bottom is falling out beneath ordinary people across America—college students, artists, waiters, writers, singers and computer programmers. The wave is forming in the water and soon will foam across our desert land. Younger evangelicals are putting on scuba tanks and weight belts, ready to plunge beneath the surface. We are digging through the Scriptures to find treasure beyond imagination.

Jesus Christ is the hinge that holds us to heaven. He teaches us to grab life by the chopsticks and enjoy a fresher faith. He asks us to lean against His presence and trust what seems invisible. He is the past that ordains the future. He is the beyond in the midst of our now. And though we get a glimpse of God today, tomorrow we'll gaze at Him forever. For Christ has opened paradise and ushers us into eternity. 🐣

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God: Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1961), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are taken from *The Message* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> "A Mighty Fortress is our God" by Martin Luther; English translation by Frederic H. Hedge.

<sup>4</sup> "In Christ Alone" by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty. This and other hymns by Townend and Getty are available at [www.gettymusic.com](http://www.gettymusic.com)

<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1949; first HarperCollins edition, 2001), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (Jossey-Bass, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Raymond T. McNally and Radu Florescu, *In Search of Dracula: A True History of Dracula and Vampire Legends* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1972), 102.

<sup>8</sup> "Nothing but the Blood" by Robert Lowry.

<sup>9</sup> "There is a Fountain" by William Cowper.

<sup>10</sup> Francois Fénelon, quoted in Richard J. Foster & James Bryan Smith, *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), 47.

<sup>11</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books House, 1978), 96.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, quoted in Richard J. Foster & Emilie Griffin, *Spiritual Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups on the Twelve Spiritual Disciplines* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 122.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>14</sup> “Young, Restless, and Ready for Revival” by Becky Tirabassi, [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/december/32.46.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/december/32.46.html)

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## Book Review

Driscoll, Mark. *The Radical Reformission: Reaching Out Without Selling Out*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004, pb., 2008 pages. \$14.99.

*Reviewed by John Divito*

Mark Driscoll is a controversial evangelical. He is one of the originators of what is now popularly known as the Emerging Church Movement. For some, this fact alone is enough to prevent them from reading or listening to him. But with his growing popularity, this dismissal would be a mistake. A good place for an individual to start would be *The Radical Reformission*, where Driscoll lays out his vision for the church and its relationship to the culture. By the end, Driscoll may surprise you.

His introduction lays the foundation for the rest of the work. His analysis of how the gospel, church and culture relate to each other form the basis of his book. How does he see these three interacting? “Reformission is a gathering of the best aspects of each of these types of Christianity: living in the tension of being Christians and churches who are culturally liberal yet theologically conservative and who are driven by the gospel of grace to love their Lord, brothers, and neighbors” (22). Therefore, each part handles an aspect of this reformission: loving your Lord through the gospel and loving your neighbor in the culture.

There are many things I appreciated about this book. First, it was very easy to read. He writes in a conversational tone, which makes the pages fly by. His unconventional paraphrasing of biblical stories is edgy but insightful. His personal stories are often convicting as well. Second, he warns about uncritical innovation as well as the dangers of postmodernism. Finally, Driscoll’s zeal for evangelism and missions is commendable. Actually, this is the overall purpose of the book. Driscoll wants to pull Christians out of our evangelical ghettos and have us reenter the culture to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to those who desperately need to hear it. Many in evangelicalism (as well as those in Reformed circles) need to listen to Driscoll’s challenge.

At the same time, there are some problems in Driscoll's book. His ecclesiology is weak. In a table comparing methods of evangelism (68), he contrasts "Routine Presentation Evangelism" (believe in Jesus, then belong to the church) with "Reformation Participation Evangelism" (belong to the church, then believe in Jesus). While it may be true that an honest display of Christian living attracts people to Christ and the gospel, we must not forget that the body of Christ is composed of regenerate believers. Membership and what it entails should only be extended to those who make credible professions of faith; it follows our identification of Christ in baptism. Our churches should always be inviting and welcoming to all, but we cannot minimize or remove the separation that exists between the world and the kingdom of God. The author also seems to wrap too much under the guise of cultural neutrality. Is dressing gothic or getting tattoos and body piercing morally neutral? Or are they an expression of one's heart? I do not automatically dismiss these as cultural preferences as Driscoll seems to do.

Nevertheless, Driscoll's book is a welcomed call to action. I pray that it will awaken many from their contemporary slumber to glorify God and to love our neighbors. Let us reach those in the culture(s) in which God has placed us with the gospel! ☺

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## Letters

Dear Tom,

Three years ago I read the book *Dear Timothy*, edited by you, and have re-read it since. May I thank you for your labour in compiling the book — it has been a great help and tonic to me — confirming some things and correcting others, after 35 years as a pastor. It has been a huge help. Of the many books I have read on the pastoral ministry, it may well be the best, in my view. May I say that the "Be Courageous" chapter is a standout, in my view, and worthy of a wide audience. I meet with some other pastors four times annually in a "Book Club" to review a book. *Dear Timothy* has been "voted" one of the best we have done.

Over the last few years I have taken many copies of the book to pastors in the Central Philippines with whom I meet for annual conferences (now 17 years). It has equally been a great tonic and help to them. (Many of them have SBC roots; the Lord has done quite a wonderful work among

them — maybe 100 churches have been affected.) Where books are in short supply, I know that some of the copies of *Dear Timothy* have been passed through 6 or 7 pairs of hands. The great majority of the book speaks as well to that culture as ours. I wish you could hear the expressions of gratitude for the book from men who have little.

I thought you might be encouraged to know this.

With grateful thanks,

J. P. [via email from a reader in Australia]

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To Founders Ministries,

I wanted to send a note thanking you for all that you do at Founders. Your resources are truly a blessing to the church! I would also like to share my personal journey in accepting the biblical doctrines of grace and how God used *Founders Journal*.

I am currently a student at Southern Seminary and came to realize that the doctrines of grace are biblical only within the past few years. I thought you would be encouraged to know God used an old issue of the *Founders Journal* to help open my eyes to this great biblical truth (issue #19/20 — Winter/Spring 1995).

The funny part is that I had picked my copy up on a “free table” of the library at the non-reformed Baptist college I was attending at the time (late 1990's). I stuck it on my bookshelf and never looked at it until just a few years ago when I felt God was calling me to seminary.

I was considering SBTS but was uneasy about the thought because of its position on these doctrines. I happened to remember, by the providence of God I realize now, this little booklet had an article by Dr. Mohler, now President of Southern.

I began reading his article and then all of the others. By this time my interest had been piqued tremendously so I began carefully and prayerfully researching the subject. I was still trying to “prove them wrong” even though, in the back of my mind, I was beginning to realize that I was in fact wrong.

The wisdom of the men in the articles, Scripture, and ultimately the Holy Spirit using both worked to open my eyes to the truth. I am praying for you and the many other people who may be impacted through this wonderful ministry... only God knows!

M. G. [via email]

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