

## **“Are Baptists Historically Calvinistic?”**

**By Pastor James Beller**

A few weeks back, a Calvinistic poster on a "I hate Independent Baptists" type forum posted the following message:

"We have seen the example of "Bible Study" as promoted by the hyper-fundamentalists in this forum. Ask a question, make a statment,[sic] ignore the Biblical response, ask another question, and perhaps toss in an insult for good measure. Even the HAC students, who apparently are studying for the ministry, can't seem to hold their own in theological discussions. This is not to insult anyone's intelligence, but to point out the fact that the group you are involved in is not historic Christianity, whatever else it may be."

This is very punchy and pungent. But is it true? The insinuations are clear: If you are a "hyper-fundamentalist", then you are not a part of historic Christianity. By "hyper-fundamentalist" we assume the author means the legacy of the great evangelists of the the turn of the century such as Sam Jones, Billy Sunday, Mordeci Ham, Bob Jones, Cyclone Mac McLendon, and John R. Rice. Non-Calvinists bridging the gap in the 20th century would have been Curtis Hutson, Jack Hyles, James Crumpton and the vast majority of the Southern Baptists and the Independent Baptists. Again the insinuations of the above quote are clear: if you are not Calvinist, then you are not a part of historic Christianity.

Now there is an upswing in the reformed movement among Baptists both denominational and independent. It is not a vast movement, but it is growing slowly. Are Baptists historically reformed? Are we protestant? Are we "Calvin"ist? Before I tell you what I think, let me clarify a few things.

1. I am a strong believer in the doctrines of Grace. Man is hopeless to save himself and cannot be saved with his own works.
2. I am grateful for that part of reformed doctrine which teaches man's inability to save himself from Hell, sin, and death and points mankind to lean upon, trust, rely, yea, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus for salvation.
3. I believe that since man cannot save himself, he is eternally secure in his salvation since he is birthed into the family of God, and is placed in Jesus, inheriting eternal life in Him.
4. I find it a difficult thing to criticize people who gave their lives for what they believe. Calvinists in history have indeed suffered.

I do understand that there are some Calvinists who do not consider themselves "hyper", but are a kinder, gentler, type of Calvinist, the "Five Pointer" or "Tulip", of which Charles Spurgeon is supposed to be. I don't argue their point, and I can see there is a difference:

*Five point Calvinism:* Total Depravity of Man, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints.

"Hyper-Calvinism" --emphasizes irresistible grace to such an extent that there is no real need to evangelize; furthermore, Christ may be offered only to the elect.

There is an awful lot more about Calvinism that is worth mentioning, but not worth studying to the average guy. This is the part that is so oddball to most of the average plowboys in the pulpit and pew:

*Reprobation*

*Supralapsarianism*

*Preterition*

*Infralapsarianism*

And other really big words that lost people and most saved people don't care about. These are things that make no difference to the salvation of the lost when you attempt to win them to Christ. They also are pretty meaningless to the progress of a convert's growth as a Christian (see the "end" of the commandment in 1Tim 1:5).

The fancy theological terms above are what Will Durant was referring to in his definitive work on civilizations when he called Calvinism "one of strangest chapters in the history of nonsense."

Back to the subject at hand: are Baptists historically "Calvinist"?

When the ana-Baptists began to rub elbows with the reformers in the 16th century, the history of the actions of the reformers against the Anabaptists makes me lose respect for the reformed, to wit:

- The retaining of infant Baptism by the reformers and allowing the idea of Baptism as a means to grace as part of certain reformed doctrine.
- The evidence in Mennonite history of the hoodwinking of the Waldenses by the reformers of Switzerland. The evidence shows that the reformers (Zwingle's supporters) convinced them that their doctrine was "reformed". How could their doctrine be reformed, since their doctrines of grace existed long before Calvin or Luther were ordained Catholic priests?
- The martyr's deaths at the hand of the reformed in Germany, England and especially Switzerland.
- The exclusion of Baptist people from the bounds of orthodoxy in England in the 17th century.
- The beatings and banishments of the Baptists in America's New England in the 17th century.

Are Baptists Historically Calvinist? How can we know the answer? We must turn to the most noted Baptist historians for the answer. This we will do. I suppose the most irritating thing about the whole issue is the tendency of the majority of Calvinists to want to have it all or nothing. Either you are Calvinist or Arminian, period. If you choose to be neither, you fall into a category based on an examination of your beliefs about the availability of the atonement, free will, etc. In short, you get labeled. Labels are handed out such as: Calvinian, Amyraldist, Semi-Pelegian, Paleontologist, Antibleboludicristjunkola and etc. I ask, have Baptists always been one or the other? What is the record of our forefathers?

## **Thomas Crosby and Thomas Armitage on the London Confession of Faith**

One argument on the part of modern Calvinists to convince the ignorant Baptist public about their Calvinist roots is the signing of the London Baptist Confession of Faith in 1643. The London Confession is a grand document, expounding clearly the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. It sets in concrete the fact that these early Baptists were committed to believer's baptism by immersion. It is Calvinistic on election and grace, predestination and particular redemption. But was it a document categorically adapted by the Baptists of England?

Thomas Crosby, the oldest English Baptist historian, in commenting about the London Confession and Particular (Calvinistic) and General (non-Calvinistic) redemption said,

"And I know that there are several churches, ministers, and many particular persons, among the English Baptists, who desire not to go under the name either of these heads; because they receive what they think to be truth, without regarding with what human schemes it agrees or disagrees." Thomas Crosby--*History of the English Baptists*, Vol. I p. 174. 1740.

Let us turn to Thomas Armitage, respected Baptist historian from America to give us the details of the London Confession:

"By 1643, the Calvinist Baptist Churches in and about London had increased to seven, while the non-Calvinistic Churches numbered thirty-nine, forty-six in all. The English Calvinistic Churches, together with a French Church of the same faith, eight in all, issued a Confession of Faith in 1643." --*History of the Baptists* by Thomas Armitage, 1887, p.460.

Armitage, in stating the number of Churches in London, tells us that the Calvinist type Baptist Churches were clearly in the minority.

In fact, if we are to believe Armitage, the London Confession of Faith was not even issued so much to declare the faith, but to convince the critics that the Baptists were orthodox:"

[The London Confession of Faith, 1643, consisted] of fifty articles; not to erect a standard of faith, but to close the mouths of slanderers. Its preface says of their enemies: "They, finding us out of that common road-way themselves walk, have smote us and taken away our veil, that so we may by them be odious in the eyes of all that behold us...All cast upon us, many that fear God are discouraged and forestalled in harboring a good thought, either of us or what we profess, and many that know not God (are) encouraged, if they can find the place of our meeting, to get together in clusters to stone us, as looking upon us as a people holding such things as that we are not worthy to live" *History of the Baptists* by Thomas Armitage, 1887, p.461.

## **David Benedict's views on the Reformation and the arguments over Calvinism and Arminianism.**

David Benedict, was a Baptist historian from America whose writings stretched from the end of the 18th century into the middle of the 19th. His research and remarks are real eye openers, he writes:

"CALVIN began his course a little after Luther and Zuinglius. He was born at Noyon, in Picardy, in France, in 1509. Luther, Zuinglius, and Calvin became the heads of three distinguished parties, which were called after their names. They acted at first in concert, in the great business of the Reformation, but soon they clashed most violently with each other both in their sentiments and measures. Besides these three reformers, there were a number of others who engaged with much zeal and success in the protestant cause... But Calvin surpassed not only Luther, but all his contemporaries in learning and arts, as he did most of them in obstinacy, asperity, and turbulence. Luther fixed his stand at Wittenberg in Saxony, and was succeeded in the general care of the great hierarchy, which he established, by the soft and complying Melancthon. Calvin made his stand at Geneva, on the confines of Switzerland.

Calvin is famous for his defense of predestination and absolute decrees, and also for his opposition to the Anabaptists. From Calvin's followers originated the Presbyterians; and many other sects, who have adopted either in full or in part, his notions of predestination and grace, have consented to be called by his name. [The denomination REFORMED was given to those protestant churches, which did not embrace the doctrine and discipline of Luther.] The title was first assumed by the French protestants, who were often called Huguenots, and afterwards became the common denomination of all the Calvinistical churches on the continent.

This great body of dissenters from Lutheranism, Mosheim describes under the general denomination of the Reformed Church. But this church was at first composed of many parts, which preserved a nominal union for a time, and then split into a multitude of sects and parties. Out of the Reformed Church arose, among other sects, the Arminians and Quakers. The ARMINIANS were so called from James Arminius, who died at Leyden in Holland, in 1609, just a hundred years after Calvin was born. Arminius warmly opposed Calvin's notions, respecting predestination and absolute decrees, but he did not carry his system so far as many of his followers have done. The doctrine of falling from grace he left doubtful, but his followers soon determined it in the affirmative.

Arminius met with severe treatment from his reformed brethren. His party flourished for a time, and then dwindled away. But his peculiar sentiments have prevailed extensively, and are now imbibed by multitudes in every sect of protestants. The Church of England, since the time of the intolerant Laud, has generally embraced the doctrines of Arminius. The Lutherans are also more inclined to Arminianism than Calvinism. Episcopalians and Lutherans subscribe their Augsburg confession and thirty-nine articles, and immediately preach and write directly against them.

Calvin and Arminius have their partisans in every country and **thousands spend much time, in disputing about these favorite chiefs, (of whom they know but little) which they might devote to a much better purpose.**" (my emphasis)--*A Summary view of Ecclesiastical History, A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America, and other parts of the world,* by David Benedict.

In England, the Calvinist Baptists were known as "Particular", because of their belief in a limited atonement, while the non-Calvinists were known as "General" for their belief that the atonement was available to all. When the Baptists began to multiply in America, the name "Regular" was

applied to the Calvinists, while non-Calvinists (especially in the Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia regions) were called "Separate".

Both groups adhered basically to the Philadelphia Confession of Faith which was in essence the same Confession as the Calvinistic London Confession, but the Separates in America, rejected the "Particular" or limited atonement flavor of the document. For this of course, the Separates were labeled "Arminian". The controversy between the Regulars and Separates was in full bloom in the 1780's in Virginia. Armitage tells us how it was resolved:

"The Calvinistic controversy had been imported by the General and Particular Baptists, who had come from England. For a time they lived happily with each other, probably held together by the cohesive power of opposition from without. But, by and by, as they became stronger, they dropped the names of General and Particular and conducted their doctrinal contest under the name of Separate and Regular Baptist. Samuel Harriss, John Waller and Jeremiah Walker were leaders of the Arminian side, while E. Craig, William Murphy and John Williams were leaders on the Calvinistic side; but while they conducted their debates with great freedom and utterance, they also clung to each other with brotherly love. Having suffered so much together in a common cause, the thought of separation was too painful to be endured. They, therefore, treated each other with all the cordiality of Christian gentlemen, or as Mr. Spurgeon would say, they agreed to keep two bears in their house, 'bear and forbear;' and the result was, after a long and full discussion in 1787, they agreed to know each other, and to be known to others, as The United Baptist Churches of Christ in Virginia." History of the Baptists by Thomas Armitage, 1887, p.780-781

Historically speaking, they did not have to be either, or they could be one or another. Is it becoming clear to you? Please don't tell the world that Baptists are historically "Calvinist". You would not be in agreement with Crosby, Benedict, or Armitage. Here is a little more.

### **The Testimony of William Carey.**

William Carey is universally recognized as the "father of modern foreign missions. He was saved and baptized by immersion in 1783. Carey was a shoe maker by trade, but soon surrendered to the call of God to preach the gospel. He forged a friendship with a young preacher from Kettering whose name was Andrew Fuller. Together, these two young men would awaken the Calvinists from their "Particular" sleep and raise the consciousness of an entire generation of English Baptists.

Carey's biographer relates the state of the Baptist churches of England in the late-1700's:

The Baptists, who had stood alone as the advocates of toleration, religious and civil, in an age of intolerance which made them the victims, had subsided like Puritan and Covenanter when the Revolution of 1688 brought persecution to an end. The section who held the doctrine of "general" redemption, and are now honourably known as General Baptists, preached ordinary Arminianism, and even Socinianism. The more earnest and educated among them clung to Calvinism, but, by adopting the unhappy term of "particular" Baptists, gradually fell under a fatalistic and antinomian spell.

This false Calvinism, which the French theologian of Geneva would have been the first to denounce, proved all the more hostile to the preaching of the Gospel of salvation to the heathen abroad, as well as the sinner at home, that it professed to be an orthodox evangel while either emasculating the Gospel or turning the grace of God into licentiousness.

From such "particular" preachers as young Fuller and Carey listened to, at first with bewilderment, then impatience, and then denunciation, missions of no kind could come. Fuller exposed and pursued the delusion with a native shrewdness, a masculine sagacity, and a fine English style, which have won for him the apt name of the Franklin of Theology. For more than twenty years Fullerism, as it was called, raised a controversy like that of the Marrow of Divinity in Scotland, and cleared the ground sufficiently at least to allow of the foundation of foreign missions in both countries.

It now seems incredible that the only class who a century ago represented evangelicalism should have opposed missions to the heathen on the ground that the Gospel is meant only for the elect, whether at home or abroad; that nothing spiritually good is the duty of the unregenerate, therefore "nothing must be addressed to them in a way of exhortation excepting what relates to external obedience." --*Life of William Carey, Shoemaker & Missionary* By George Smith C.I.E., LL.D. 1909. Chapter 2.

Carey's vision of taking the gospel to a lost heathen world seemed at first to be a wild fantasy, unnecessary and dangerous. He and Andrew Fuller prayed, preached and wrote for nine years for the eyes of the hyper-Calvinists (whose writings carried influence over the Baptists at that time) to be opened. Three things broke the backs of the "Particulars":

1. Andrew Fuller's *The Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation* (1784)
2. Carey's work-- *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens, in which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of Former Undertakings, and the Practicability of Further Undertakings* (1786); and
3. Carey's sermon, *Expect Great Things from God, Attempt Great Things for God*, delivered on May 31, 1792, in Nottingham. Smith relates the story of the sermon to us:

"The text was Isaiah's (liv. 2, 3) vision of the widowed church's tent stretching forth till her children inherited the nations and peopled the desolate cities, and the application to the reluctant brethren was couched in these two great maxims written ever since on the banners of the missionary host of the kingdom--

EXPECT GREAT THINGS FROM GOD.  
ATTEMPT GREAT THINGS FOR GOD.

"The service was over; even Fuller was afraid, even Ryland made no sign, and the ministers were leaving the meeting. Seizing Fuller's arm with an imploring look, the preacher, whom despair emboldened to act alone for his Master, exclaimed: 'And are you, after all, going again to do nothing?'

What Fuller describes as the 'much fear and trembling' of these inexperienced, poor, and ignorant village preachers gave way to the appeal of one who had gained both knowledge and courage,

and who, as to funds and men, was ready to give himself. They entered on their minutes this much:--'That a plan be prepared against the next ministers' meeting at Kettering for forming a Baptist Society for propagating the Gospel among the Heathen.'" *ibid*, Chapter 2.

### **Our Conclusions**

Upon examination of the history of the Baptist movement, it is no surprise to me that Baptists have strayed from their Calvinist roots: there is no evidence that Baptists greatly accepted Calvinism. And when Calvinism gained influence it degenerated in hyper-Calvinism and had to be defeated by aggressive soul winning efforts and teaching.

Calvinism, like any other system of theology is only as good as it is scriptural. It can be aberrant when it descends into a predestinated election that discourages soul winning evangelism. Arminianism is aberrant when it distances itself from grace and eternal security.

Are Baptists HISTORICALLY Calvinist? Are you out of the bounds of historic Christianity if you are non-Calvinist? The historians don't say so.

Whether General atonement vs. Particular atonement, election vs free will, HISTORY says Baptists would rather be neither, and perfectly fine to be either. Embracing the scriptures means you are a little of both.

James Beller