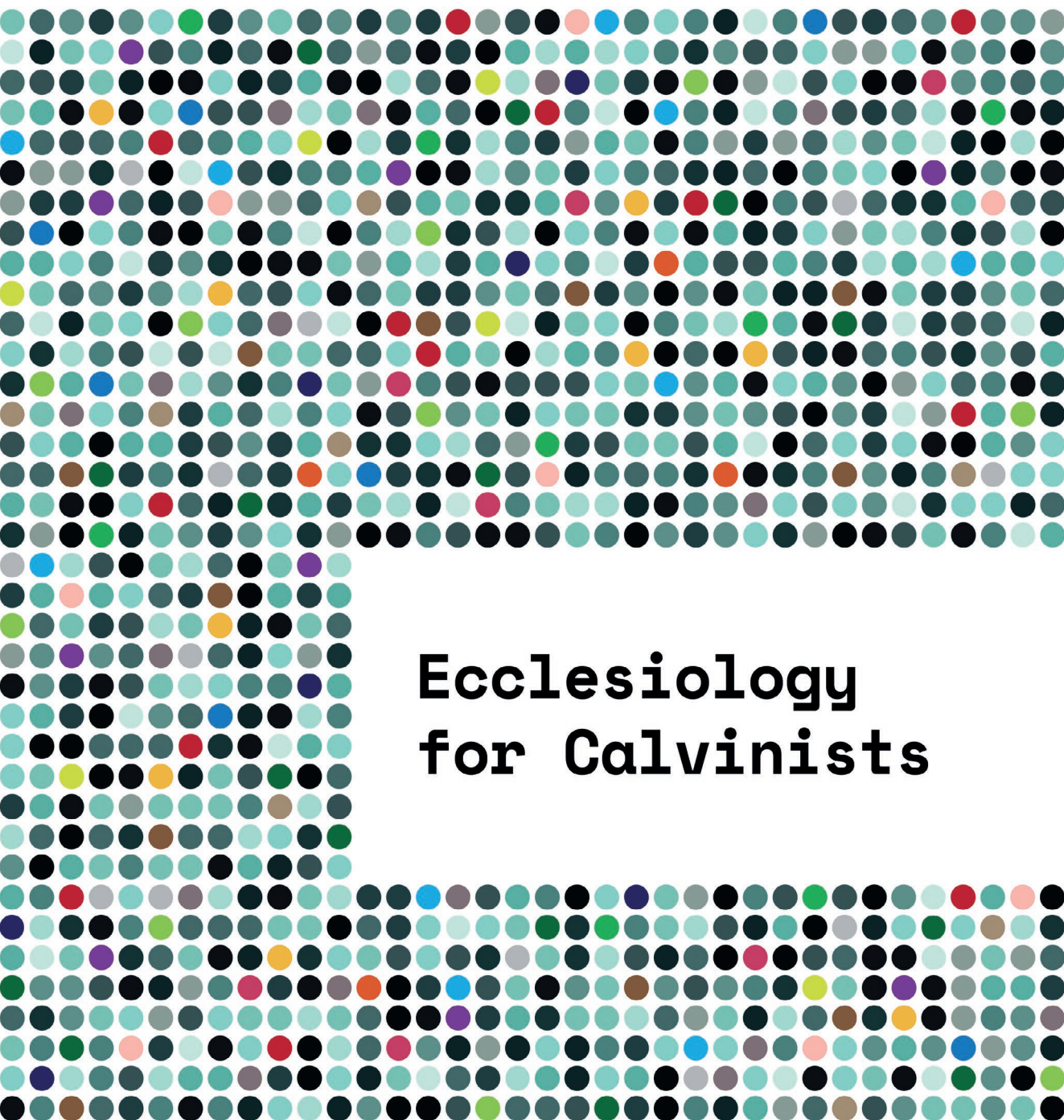


# **IX** 9Marks Journal



**Ecclesiology  
for Calvinists**



Biblical Thinking for Building Healthy Churches

# **IX** 9Marks Journal

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# Editor's Note



**Jonathan Leeman**

If you are not a Calvinist, this 9Marks Journal is not for you. It's for my Calvinist brethren. We need a group huddle, friends, specifically on the topics of ecclesiology and how we do ministry.

Here's big idea number one: what you believe about God and salvation should impact how you view the church and do ministry. Soteriology impacts ecclesiology. I trust you agree with that at least in principle.

The thing is, it's easy for us to own the label Calvinist yet remain revivalistic. That's big idea number two. The biggest threat to Calvinism isn't Arminianism, but pragmatism.

So suffuse is Western culture with self-sufficiency and pragmatism, we all naturally default toward Second-Great-Awakening rather than First-Great-Awakening practices. During the days of Charles Finney and Billy Sunday that meant trusting our ability to persuade people down the sawdust trail more than trusting the ordinary means of grace. Today it means we think we can "reverse engineer" our structures and ministry practices in order to yield more fruit. Or we aspire to reaching the "tipping point" of con-

versions in a city, where the powers of sociology will kick in and change that city, not dissimilar—I'd say—from Finney's reliance on the powers of psychology to draw people off his infamous anxious bench.

If these historical references are new to you, I'd strongly encourage you to start with Michael Lawrence's piece on the difference between revival and revivalism. We should pray for revival, not get caught up in the movement psychology and pragmatics of revivalism. Owen Strachan's piece, too, is crucial for discovering how we reached this present moment. Meanwhile, Collin Hansen's article offers an update on the Young, Restless, Reformed movement and what's happened over the last ten years.

The ensuing articles by Matt Merker, Patti Withers, Sam Ema-di, Steve Wellum, Jonathan Worsley, Jeramie Rinne, Alex Kocman, Greg Turner, Raymond Johnson, and myself help trace specific points of connection between our understanding of salvation and our practical ministry. Take special note of Alex Duke's piece, *You're So Depraved, You Probably Think This Church Is About You*.

Speaking of a Calvinist team huddle, Aaron Menikoff, JA Medders, PJ Tibayan, and David Schrock offer the pastoral word we all need to hear. Let's reserve our real excitement for Jesus and his Word, they say, not Calvinism.

If you're a non-Calvinist and still here, poking your ear into our huddle, I'll say this: I expect you may agree with many of the practices we commend in this Journal, because we're all trying to learn from the Bible. And we're grateful for our gospel partnership together. We may not share a soteriology but we can still share the same ministry commitments explicitly revealed in Scripture—membership, discipline, faithful shepherding, evangelism, and the centrality of the preached Word.

# Hey Calvinist, Enough of Your Revivalism



Michael Lawrence

**H**ow do you grow your church? It's a question every pastor or church leader asks, a question in which almost every Christian is interested. And let's assume the best motive for the question, a sincere desire to see men, women, and children both knowing and growing in the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The question is *how*?

Ever since the early 1800s and the apparent success of the Second Great Awakening, the answer for most church leaders has been the techniques of revivalism. Revivalism and revival are not the same thing. Solomon Stoddard, a Puritan minister in western Massachusetts, defined revival as “some special seasons wherein God doth in a remarkable manner revive religion among his people.”<sup>1</sup> His emphasis is on both the surprising and supernatural aspect of revival, and its impact on the church generally. Conversion *and* discipleship, growth numerically *and* spiritually, are the result of divinely-wrought revival. His grandson, Jonathan Edwards, a leader of the First Great Awakening and its most able

<sup>1</sup> Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Banner of Truth, 1994), xvii.

theological defender, would go on to argue that a genuine work of God's Spirit isn't "revealed by the quantity or intensity of religious emotions but is rather present where a heart had been changed to love God and seek his pleasure."<sup>2</sup> In other words, it's the fruit of the Spirit, not enthusiasm or momentum, that demonstrates God is at work.

Revivalism, on the other hand, is a set of techniques and methods that are assumed to reliably obtain "the external signs of conviction, repentance and rebirth."<sup>3</sup> As historian Iain Murray notes, while revival preachers of the Great Awakening would have had no idea how "to secure a revival, a system was now popularized by 'revivalists' which came near to guaranteeing results."<sup>4</sup> So much so that ever since the Second Great Awakening, a "revival" could be announced in advance! Today we call it "reverse engineering" results.

From the camp meetings, altar calls, and anxious bench of the Second Great Awakening, to the marriage of emotionally powerful preaching and singing in the ministry of Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey, to the stirring rallies of Billy Graham, the style of revivalism has shifted to match the changing culture. But the techniques have remained largely the same: the context of the mass meeting to encourage a response, the deliberate use of emotion to motivate a response, and the routine of a set prayer or physical action to actuate the response. Underlying all of this is the assumption that conversion can be reduced to, or at least evidenced by, a personal response that the preacher can elicit, observe, and measure.

I don't mean to imply that the Second Great Awakening, or the ministries of Moody, Graham, and others did not result in true conversions. They certainly did. In fact, most of us probably know someone who came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ at a Bil-

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Eerdmans, 1992), 96.

<sup>3</sup> Murray, xix.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.



ly Graham rally. But if Scripture is to be our guide, we must never say that people became Christians because of the techniques of these ministries. After all, conversion is the supernatural and sovereign work of God, in which, through the message of the gospel and by the power of the Holy Spirit, he brings about conviction of sin, lasting repentance, and faith in the substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our response of repentance and faith is the unfailing result of God's necessarily prior work of regeneration. Unless he makes us alive and gives us the gift of repentance and faith, we will remain dead in our sins. And there's no human technique that can either force his hand or accomplish his work. This is what it means to be a Calvinist. More importantly, this is what it means to hold the same theology as Paul (Eph. 2:1-10) and Jesus (John 6:44-45; 10:27-30)

However, it wasn't long before revivalist techniques moved from the evangelist's ad hoc "revival meeting" to the local church's regular Sunday worship. These revivalistic flourishes have even occurred in churches that confess a Reformed, or Calvinistic, understanding of salvation. And why not? After all, it apparently produced results. If you could gather a crowd (attract), connect with them in an emotionally meaningful way (relate), and remove barriers to response (automate), then you could grow your church without abandoning your theological convictions.

From Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral, to Willow Creek and Saddleback, to Mars Hill and Elevation, to your local megachurch, the style and music and branding has changed, but the method tends to be fundamentally the same across the theological spectrum. The pragmatic approach to church growth—*attract, relate, and automate*—works.

Just ask the Calvinists who pastor large, growing churches. "I like the (attractional) evangelism I do better than the evangelism you don't do." "Anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart." "All it takes to grow a church is good music,

a great children's program, and sufficient parking.”<sup>5</sup> These comments defend fundamentally pragmatic, attractional approaches to the church, despite the sincerely held belief in the sovereignty of God in salvation by those who said them.

Twenty-five years ago, theologian David Wells published *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, the first of his volumes critiquing modern evangelicalism's love affair with modernity.<sup>6</sup> He concluded that as far back as the Second Great Awakening, evangelicals had begun to use the tools of modernity (marketing, technique, bureaucratization, etc.) to accomplish the work of God. The goals were noble, but the motivation was pragmatic. In the modern world, success is measured by numbers, and the tools of modernity worked. As revivalism was refined and perfected by the methods of the marketplace, churches were growing, the “unchurched” were streaming in, and multitudes were being saved. Blinded by our apparent success, however, Wells revealed what the rest of us had failed to see. The tools of modernity produce the culture of modernity, not the kingdom of God. As survey after survey revealed, our growing churches were not filled with the results of Spirit-wrought revival, genuine converts characterized by the fruit of the Spirit, but were filled instead with the results of modern revivalism, religious consumers characterized by the spirit of the age.

So, back to the question: how do you grow your church? I suppose it depends on what you think a church is and who you think people are. If you think a church is just a crowd of people who are fundamentally able, perhaps with help from God, to choose to follow Jesus, so long as he's attractive and relevant enough, then the tools of revivalism are just the ticket. But if you think a church is a gathering of people who were dead in their sins but have been

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5 Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Mission or Message* (Zondervan, 1995), 219. Comments one and three from private conversations with pre-2015 Acts 29 pastors.

6 David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993).

born again through the sovereign and supernatural work of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, then revivalism just won't do.

What we want is revival, a genuine work of the Spirit, not a product of human technique. From the very beginning, the work of God has been done by the Spirit of God through the Word of God in a world gone awry.<sup>7</sup> From the first preaching of the gospel at Pentecost, to the recovery of gospel preaching in the Reformation, to the explanation of the gospel that God used to save you, God has always worked through his Word faithfully proclaimed to bring the dead to life.

So, “Calvinist,” enough of your revivalism. Grow your church through the ordinary means of grace that God has always used to grow his church: the right preaching of the gospel, the right administration of the ordinances, and the right use of church discipline. Give yourself to the ministry of word and prayer as the apostles did (Acts 6:4). Stop relying on the tools of modernity to build the kingdom of God because they never have and they never will.

There's nothing wrong with having culturally appropriate music, adequate parking, attractive signage, and a clear process for joining the church. Those are important matters to which we must attend. But don't think those tools, and others like them, will build Christ's church. They won't because they can't. It's not our ability to design an attractive worship experience or authentically relate to people in our sermons that raises the spiritually dead to life. The Spirit alone can and will do that work, and he does it through his Word, not our techniques.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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<sup>7</sup> HT, David Helm.

# Reformation Doctrine Fuels Reformation Ecclesiology: A Brief History



Owen Strachan

The saloon comes as near being a rat hole for a wage-earner to dump his wages in as anything you can find. The only interest it pays is red eyes and foul breath, and the loss of health. You can go in with money and you come out with empty pockets. You go in with character and you come out ruined. ... And then it will let your wife be buried in the potter's field, and your children go to the asylum, and yet you walk out and say the saloon is a good institution, when it is the dirtiest thing on earth. It hasn't one leg to stand on and has nothing to commend it to a decent man, not one thing.

— Billy Sunday

**T**he language could scarcely ring out more vividly. Billy Sunday's famous "Booze" sermon of the early twentieth century threw down the gauntlet against the liquor trade. Traveling

the country, stalking the perimeter, even sliding into home plate on stage, Sunday preached the gospel of salvation even as he led a new social movement.<sup>8</sup> His sermons and his model helped create the “revivalist” pulpit and the revival-driven church. Gone were the staid tones and theological precision of First Great Awakening preachers; in rushed the colloquial maxims, tear-jerking stories, and fiery social commentary of Sunday and his peers.<sup>9</sup>

Sunday was not the first. Finney and Moody came before him; Graham came after him. These men fundamentally changed American ecclesiology, but not with direct intent. They did so by their discourse. Once, a young preacher-boy found his heart moved toward ministry through the 90-minute sermons of the Puritans, affective homilies grounded in the biblical text. Now, young preachers were drawn by down-home pronunciations and the revivalist’s explosive results. There was fire in that pulpit; there were catalytic conversions, immediate effects, and national headlines. Was seminary necessary for the future preacher? Should preachers invest in deep exegesis, systematic theology, and homiletics? What about training under a seasoned, godly pastor? The answer to these questions in the revivalist heyday—roughly the mid-nineteenth century—seemed to be a resounding no.

Something remarkable happened to the church in this period. In many congregations, the carefully constructed ecclesiological blueprint of the corporate body ended up stuffed in a box in the basement. With little formal discussion, the congregation adapted to this barnstorming spirit as the church came to see itself as a waystation on the revival circuit.<sup>10</sup> Drinking in the reports of “soul salvation” from the national newspapers, churches began to

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8 To better understand Sunday, see Roger A. Bruns, *Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big-Time American Evangelism* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois, 1992).

9 For more on these changes, see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

10 These developments can defy easy identification, but Brooks Holifield has done helpful work in tracing them in this period. See E. Brooks Holifield, *God’s Ambassadors: A History of the Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

change their self-understanding. Pastors were not theologians, but revivalists-in-chief; corporate gatherings were about evangelism of the lost, not discipleship of believers; “success” in the ministry involved a multiplicity of hands raised to declare a “decision” for Christ, not a doctrine-driven church characterized by holiness.<sup>11</sup>

In Baptist churches in particular, the transformation was as striking as it was undiscussed. No one, after all, had formally decreed that these things come to pass, and yet you couldn’t miss it: revivalism was in, formal ecclesiology was downplayed, and Baptist churches morphed into something new—at least in their emphasis and formal practice. With the rise of church growth methodology, this model reached its peak.

## THE DOCTRINAL COUNTER-REVOLUTION

Something of a doctrinal counter-revolution against revivalism emerged in the late twentieth century. The reasons for this counter-movement are many: the secularization of America made it tougher to sell soft Christianity; the bloating of church membership rolls made the lives of pastors who actually cared for their flocks difficult; and the dissolution of many marriages, families, and individual lives in the wake of the sexual revolution contributed to the dismantling of cultural Christianity. In addition, the ongoing creep of “moderate” theology in Baptist seminaries and universities meant that many ministers were trained not to trust the Bible, not to preach the whole counsel of God, and not to lead people into historic evangelical doctrine.<sup>12</sup> The Baptist movement

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11 One exception to this rule: Park Street Church’s Harold John Ockenga. To better understand Ockenga, a singular figure, investigate Garth M. Rosell, *The Surprising Work of God: Harold John Ockenga, Billy Graham, and the Rebirth of Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); also Owen Strachan, *Awakening the Evangelical Mind: An Intellectual History of Neo-evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2015). Handling Ockenga’s ecclesiology, it should be said, requires discernment, since he pushed for both good and ill in this regard.

12 To get a solid grasp on modern Protestant liberalism, see Gregory A. Wills, *The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1859–2009* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009); also Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805–1900* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

developed an interest in strange ideas, new methods, and an errant Bible. The “no creed but the Bible” camp seemed to have won the day, as many evangelical schools (beyond the Baptists, but including them) made such disconnection a point of pride and, ironically, a mark of soundness.<sup>13</sup>

Enter J. I. Packer, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and the once-forgotten Puritans.<sup>14</sup> At the time when many Baptists, Presbyterians, and others struggled to discern who they were, Packer and Lloyd-Jones re-presented the wisdom and vibrant piety of these sixteenth and seventeenth-century pastor-theologians in the annual Puritan conference at Westminster Chapel, the site of Lloyd-Jones’s ministry. In America, figures like James Boice and Tom Nettles began calling both Presbyterian and Baptist pastors back to their theological roots. The Reformation hadn’t died, it turned out.<sup>15</sup>

This return to Reformation soteriology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is well-known and increasingly well-documented. But it wasn’t only Reformation soteriology that returned to the fore. Reformation ecclesiology came with it.

## THE REDISCOVERY OF ECCLESIOLOGY

Congregations that begin taking the Bible seriously on the doctrine of salvation can scarcely help but take the Bible seriously on the doctrine of the church. The two cannot be separated; the Spir-

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13 You could argue with some accuracy that “no creed but the Bible” ironically became a creed—and a far more restrictive and narrow-minded one than any previous confessional statement.

14 Mark Dever’s overview of the background of the Reformed Resurgence captures these and numerous other factors in the revival of Reformation doctrine. See Mark Dever, “Wherèd All These Calvinists Come from?” *9Marks*, June 18, 2014, accessible at <https://www.9marks.org/article/whered-all-these-calvinists-come-from>. Consult also the concise but richly incisive overview by Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Travels with the New Calvinists* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Crossway, 2009). A full-fledged academic treatment (or two or three) awaits us; PhD students, take note.

15 For short and readable introductions to Reformation doctrine see Michael Reeves’s marvelous *The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation* (Nashville: B&H, 2010); also Jason K. Allen, ed., *Sola: How the Five Solas Are Still Reforming the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2019). It may surprise readers to know that the Reformers never used the term “five solas” or the equivalent. Suffice it to say that Lutheran theologian Theodore Engelder and Emil Brunner (!) in the twentieth century summarized Reformation doctrine with the five solas. See Owen Strachan, “Glory to God Alone” in *Sola*, ed. Allen, 128–29n. 3.

it who saves the individual through union with Christ is the Spirit who brings that individual into union with the blood-bought people of God. We're not saved into isolation; we're saved into a family, a collection of strangers and pilgrims rescued from the world and brought into the household of God our Father and protector (1 Peter 2:11).

As pastors realized the Bible spoke powerfully to the sovereignty of God in redemption, they also realized that the Bible presented itself as the very food of the people of God. This sparked a rediscovery of the pastoral office. The pastor was not revivalist-in-chief. Though he must intentionally address unbelievers in his sermons and unstintingly call them to repentance and faith in Christ, he now saw himself as fundamentally responsible to lend strength to the body of believers given him by Almighty God. He must “teach them all things,” bringing the whole counsel of God to bear on their minds, their affections, and their wills (Matthew 28:16–20).

What a sea-change this was.<sup>16</sup> This “new” model of ministry was actually old—very old. Doctrine was not for the cranky intellectual types who liked parsing hard-to-read books in the church basement. Doctrine was the very life-blood of the church. Doctrine—by which we simply mean biblical truth in collated and synthesized form—fed the people, blessed the people, guarded the people, and readied the people to meet their Maker. The pastor, it turned out, was not a life-coach, a CEO, an administrator, a therapist, or a heart-on-his-sleeve storyteller. The pastor was a theologian, and his call was to minister sound doctrine in the hospital room, in the marriage counseling session, in the youth group, in a lunchtime Bible study, in an evangelistic encounter, and yes—*suprema gloriae*—in the pulpit.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This sea-change deserves further reflection. To begin, read Thomas White and John M. Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), a brave book. Also consider the searing and paradigm-altering critique of much modern ministry offered by Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> For a short and readable introduction to this model of the pastorate, see Jason K. Allen, *Portraits of a Pastor: The 9 Essential Roles of a Church Leader* (Chicago: Moody, 2017).



The sermon, the height of Reformation worship, was not a homilette. It was a *meal*. It shepherded the people deep into the text of Scripture and its Christological significance.<sup>18</sup> While we often date the Reformation from Luther's 95 theses, practically, the Reformation began on January 1, 1519, when Zwingli ascended the pulpit of Great Minster and began preaching—from the Greek—from Matthew 1. Thus the reformation re-introduced the *lectio continua*—verse-by-verse expository preaching of God's Word.

The sizeable and ever-growing group of modern pastors who have been freshly awakened to Reformation theology and practice found themselves thinking, *Could I do this? Do I dare exposit the text, week-by-week, moving steadily through a biblical book? Will I get fired?* These questions weren't silly. In the doctrinally weak, often man-centered context of American evangelicalism, this was live ammo.

Among many Baptist ministers, this rediscovery of the Reformation resulted in a Copernican revolution. As denominational seminaries and colleges moved away from “moderate” theology and began teaching sound doctrine once more, many future pastors began asking hard questions about the Reformation's doctrine of the church. These pastors were exegetically convinced of credobaptism.<sup>19</sup> As a result, a large number found themselves unsettled by the paedobaptism of the Reformers whose theology they justly revered.

But even as Baptist pastors have broken with the Magisterial Reformers on some matters of ecclesiology, they found other first and second-generation Reformers who shared their concern

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18 To learn more on Reformation homiletics, consult Scott M. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company of Pastors: Pastoral Care and the Emerging Reformed Church, 1536–1609*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 69–94.

19 There are different streams of Baptist hermeneutics, including Baptist covenantalism of the London variety, New Covenant Theology, and Progressive Covenantalism (PC). Readers should engage all three as valuable contributors to Baptist theology. I find the PC model offered by Stephen Wellum, Peter Gentry, and Tom Schreiner (among others) to fit Scripture like a glove. See Stephen Wellum and Brent E. Parker, eds., *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015). Schreiner's chapter on the Sabbath in this volume is particularly insightful. Consider also Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017).

for credobaptism and regenerate church membership. During the Reformation, Anabaptists advocated that the believers' church fit the New Testament model. They also advocated that the church and state were separate institutions, and that the state was in no way to oversee or interfere with local assemblies (or broader denominations or networks).

The Anabaptists' Radical Reformation, though usually placed on a lower shelf than the Magisterial, made an equally important contribution to the post-Reformation church's doctrine—one we must continually re-apply in our day. While the Anabaptists are a crucial part of the family tree, the early English Baptists are the direct genetic forebear of the modern Baptist church. These faithful believers held to staunch Reformed theology, even writing it in stone in their earliest confessions (London 1644 and 1689, Philadelphia 1742). If the modern Baptist movement has moved in considerable measure toward Reformed theology, then we must conclude it has only moved closer to its roots.<sup>20</sup>

## **CONCLUSION: WHERE ARE WE HEADED TODAY?**

It is now 2019, precisely 500 years after Zwingli preached from Matthew 1. Evangelicals in the West are increasingly finding themselves called out for our exclusivism, our evangelism, and our sexual ethics. It is, we may say, getting harder to be a meaningful Christian in our time. Our children and grandchildren will face greater challenges still.

If this is true, then what on earth are we to do?

I submit that we need a Reformational pulpit, Reformational pastors, and a Reformational doctrine of our holy God. Revivalism did some serious good; it won souls to Christ, but it didn't offer

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<sup>20</sup> To better understand early Baptists, dive into the work of Tom Nettles and Michael Haykin, among others. Start with Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Cape Coral, Florida: Founders Press, 2006); Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015). See also the "Baptist trilogy" by Nettles. In addition, see Jason G. Duesing, *Counted Worthy: The Life and Work of Henry Jessey* (BorderStone, 2012).

a sturdy and stable model of ministry, the church, or the Christian life. We need Reformational pulpits—pulpits that proclaim the glory of God and his Word in a demonstration of spiritual power (1 Cor. 2:4–5).<sup>21</sup> We need Reformational pastors—men who see themselves as theologians of the Word, under-shepherds of Christ’s sheep who love their churches and feed them the delicious food of God’s truth. Finally, we need a Reformational doctrine of God, to see afresh that our holy God desires a holy people for himself. We cannot settle for bloated, formless, unregenerate congregations. We need Reformation *theology proper* to drive Reformation soteriology and thus form true Reformation ecclesiology.<sup>22</sup>

What was old is new; what was once lost is now recovered; what seems pointless and offensive to the natural man is the very lifeblood of God’s people. The Reformation fire has not gone out, nor has the evangelistic zeal of the modern American church died. The Word still speaks—and the gospel still is mighty to save.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Owen Strachan is associate professor of Christian Theology, Director of the Residency PhD program, and Director of the Center for Public Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is the author of several books, including *Always in God’s Hands* and *The Pastor as Public Theologian* (with Kevin Vanhoozer).

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21 This demonstration, we are at pains to say, comes not through an ability to perform signs and wonders on the spot, but through the supernatural ministry of preaching, which gives spiritual life and overcomes the world, the flesh, and the devil. This text is not therefore a “signs and wonders” text, as if any one movement can exclusively claim a text, but a homiletic text. The method and power given the post-apostolic church is not grounded in performance of wonders; we have no New Testament text that would instruct us in how to enact such miraculous acts. It is instead grounded in sound preaching and the ministry of the Word—see 2 Timothy 1–2. We cannot raise the dead and heal the sick as the apostles did. We can, however, do something yet more effectual in the supernatural realm (for physically-healed individuals are not necessarily spiritually-converted individuals): see souls saved from hell by the Spirit-powered ministry of the Word.

22 The book that comes the closest to offering this sort of call is the classic study of the Puritans by J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990). Young theologians should pay considerable attention to Packer’s model and method. On these counts, see Leland Ryken, *J. I. Packer: An Evangelical Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), which is filled with insights for theologians who would be faithful to God and the sacred text.

# Still Young, Restless, and Reformed? The New Calvinists at 10



Collin Hansen

There was always one question I couldn't find anyone to answer about the sudden growth of Calvinism. I talked to critics and enthusiasts, laypeople and clergy, and gained a clear sense for *how*, *when*, and *where* Calvinism is spreading in the United States after nearly 150 years of eclipse. But I published my book *Young, Restless, Reformed* in 2008 before I got an answer to *why*. The answer would come years later and from an unlikely source. And that discovery would help me anticipate the next great challenge that threatens to unravel the New Calvinism.

I can't imagine there's much in *Young, Restless, Reformed* that Charles Taylor would approve. And yet this Catholic philosopher from Canada, born in 1931, helped me see the counterintuitive appeal of Calvinism in our secular age. Taylor published his seminal work, *A Secular Age*, less than a year before I released *Young, Restless, Reformed*. And I'm not exaggerating to suggest that his

work might be the most ambitious book published in the last decade. He aims to offer nothing less than an explanation for the rise of secularism in West during the last 500 years since the Reformation.

In what Taylor describes as the “age of authenticity,” it’s not just that religious affiliation has declined. It’s that even many people who still occasionally attend church understand God in fundamentally different ways. Sociologist Christian Smith and his colleagues with the National Study of Youth and Religion have found something similar, and their report originally supported my research for *Young, Restless, Reformed*. Many youth even in evangelical churches think God is distant and uninvolved, though still concerned with our good behavior. Mostly, though, he just wants us to be happy. So religion in our secular age aims to give us what we want, in material or therapeutic terms. We want to be good and feel good. Smith and his colleagues gave us the now-famous description of this new religion in the West: “moralistic therapeutic deism.”

Taylor’s *A Secular Age* dives deep into the philosophy and history behind this turn to the self as the center of all things. In our secular age God only gets to be god on our own terms. A God who is not for us, in ways we will admit, cannot be against us. “Moralistic therapeutic deism” may be taught in many churches. But it’s a whole new and different religion from Christianity. Consider how Taylor describes the modern view toward atonement:

And hence what was for a long time and remains for many the heart of Christian piety and devotion: love and gratitude at the suffering and sacrifice of Christ, seems incomprehensible, or even repellant and frightening to many. To celebrate such a terrible act of violence as a crucifixion, to make this the centre of your religion, you have to be sick; you have to be perversely attached to self-mutilation, because it assuages your self-hatred, or calms your fears of healthy self-affirmation. You are elevating self-punishment,

which liberating humanism wants to banish as a pathology to the rank of the numinous. (*A Secular Age*, 650)

It's not just that Calvinists might be wrong about the atonement. It's that we must be sick and twisted to sit in church and belt out songs like "And Can It Be" that glory in the cross. So why *are* we so contrary to the zeitgeist?

Here's where things clicked for me as I read Taylor. Our secular age narrows the options: Either God is for you, on your own terms, or God sets the terms. Reformed theology offers a compelling biblical case for why we should not trust ourselves, and why we can trust the crucified and risen Jesus. Reformed theology shows us God as transcendent and inscrutable, yet immanent and sympathetic. God is no mere cosmic butler to our whims. But he loved us enough to send his one and only Son to the cross to die for our sins.

You won't find many writers on the Christian bestseller lists who think about God as transcendent and inscrutable. So Calvinism remains a minority report among evangelicals who prefer the "be good, feel good" God who promises our best life now. But you will find plenty of biblical and theological insight from Christians a few centuries back. They wrote before the shift toward "expressive individualism," where we learn to evaluate truth based on whether it resonates with us inwardly. That's not the God who calls us to pick up our cross and follow him. That God is not safe for the whole family. But he's the God so eloquently honored by the Puritans, for example, and theologians such as Jonathan Edwards. Reading these writers is almost taboo in a secular age, according to James K. A. Smith of Calvin College: "This is what makes Jonathan Edwards not only unthinkable but reprehensible to modern sensibilities: Edwards's God is *about God*, not us" (*How Not to Be Secular*, n. 115).

In the secular age you can worship God, or you can worship yourself. It's an old lie—as old as the Garden of Eden itself—but

it's particularly appealing in the smartphone era. What do we need that we cannot access from the palm of our hands? What can a local church offer that we cannot find better and brighter through a Google search? It's no coincidence that the iPhone debuted while I researched *Young, Restless, Reformed*. Any religion that endures the information revolution will need to offer a vision of God and way of life more demanding and thus more compelling than the endless distractions of the smartphone.

And that's what Reformed preachers have offered from the biblical portrayal of God who governs all things—even salvation—according to his kind providence. There's nothing more humbling, or motivating, than to know that God chose us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). A God who cares about more than making us feel good is actually a God worthy of our worship, even worthy of our affection, because he shows us life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions (Luke 12:15). It's not surprising that David Platt's *Radical* hit bestseller lists around the same time, in 2010. He pleaded with us not to believe the world's promises that the good life can be found by looking inside yourself for meaning and making yourself comfortable with a lot of stuff.

Reformed theology may go down like a stiff drink, but it gives Christians a backbone. This initial surge of Reformed theology came with John Piper telling us not to waste our lives. With Albert Mohler teaching worldview as a modern-day Francis Schaeffer. With Matt Chandler preaching sermons on God's beauty and love, uploaded to YouTube to viral effect. With Tim Keller writing book after book after book of cultural apologetics. With Kevin DeYoung churning out timely, clear, convicted blog posts.

It wasn't quite clear 10 years ago, but in this list of influencers you can see how this movement differs from earlier trends such as the post-war revival led by the likes of Billy Graham, Harold John Ockenga, and Carl Henry. And that trend reveals the first shift I've seen since I published *Young, Restless, Reformed*.

## FROM SOTERIOLOGY TO ECCLESIOLOGY

We shouldn't take for granted that the YRR survived the cage stage. That is, they came to understand Calvinism not just as a theory to be wielded against ideological opponents but as a theology to be inhabited. Compared to what I expected in 2008, relatively few churches, families, and denominations divided over Calvinism in the last decade. It could have been so much worse. And it wasn't, because the focus of theological discourse shifted from soteriology and providence toward ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church.

The turning point came in 2008. The much-anticipated purge of Calvinists that year in the Southern Baptist Convention gave way to a most welcome truce. And that's because when faced with a choice, the SBC cared more about evangelism than about hunting down the Calvinists. The Calvinists had long resented accusations of hyper-Calvinism, that they don't preach the gospel to all. Furthermore, this argument became harder to sustain as younger pastors stepped into leadership roles. Platt, who until recently served as the president of the International Mission Board, effected a missional shift in his Birmingham-area megachurch. Current SBC president J. D. Greear leads Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, which commissions seven-times more missionaries with the IMB than the second-largest sending church. Austin Stone Community Church, led by The Gospel Coalition Council member Matt Carter, claims to send even more long-term missionaries than the Summit does. And The Village Church pastor Matt Chandler took over the presidency of global church-planting network Acts 29.

To be sure, the YRR still reject certain revivalistic inducements to belief, especially the altar call and tent revivals. They also refuse to reduce the purpose of church to evangelism, as they saw an earlier generation do in the seeker-sensitive movement. But they're



nevertheless passionate about missions and evangelism, and they see the local church as the place of missional action in God's plan of redemption.

Just look at the biennial pastors' conference Together for the Gospel, which I profiled for *Christianity Today* in 2006. T4G is led by Capitol Hill Baptist Church senior pastor Mark Dever, who has mentored, befriended, and trained an entire generation of pastors. And he's working on another generation as I write. This Journal from 9Marks is the go-to source for thousands of pastors who desire to learn the biblical call and practical work of the ministry.

As the YRR aged, young men had to learn how to actually lead churches and not just read books, how to shepherd the flock and not just blog against Arminians. They had to learn how to work together with other churches without agreeing on everything. T4G modeled this cooperation between churches even as Baptists, Presbyterians, and charismatics stood by their distinct beliefs. Mohler's teaching on theological triage helped YRR pastors avoid some mistakes of previous generations. Men like Graham and Henry were not primarily known as local church figures. There are some uses for mere Christianity, or lowest-common-denominator evangelicalism. But it led to confusion and the neglect of the local church and denominations that had succumbed to liberalism.

Mohler's triage distinguishes between first-, second-, and third-order issues so that we will learn how seriously we should regard disagreement. By contrast, lowest-common-denominator evangelicalism offered meager resistance to assaults on the character of God such as open theism and universalism. This triage helped sound the alarm bells of such first-order threats as Rob Bell's *Love Wins*, published in 2011.

At the same time, triage also helped the YRR avoid the belligerency and isolation of fundamentalism. Second-order doctrines such as baptism, the Lord's Supper, charismatic gifts, and polity

are still vitally important, even if we don't agree on every conclusion. Triage helped us identify serious flaws in each other without condemning our friends and historical heroes to hell. Otherwise, the YRR would be cut off from much of Christian history and the global church in a kind of untenable Donatist purity. Finally, theological triage sidelined in the YRR certain issues that had formerly divided churches, such as questions surrounding the rapture and millennium. That's where being connected to history helped. Not everything that seemed so important in late-19th and early 20th centuries is a hill to die on today or going forward.

But triage doesn't solve all our problems. And now, we're seeing major disagreements in and among YRR, even within the same churches. Evangelicalism may not survive this transition. And the YRR may not, either. At this point, I'm talking about the more recent shift from ecclesiology to public theology.

## **FROM ECCLESIOLOGY TO PUBLIC THEOLOGY**

When working on *YRR*, Facebook had 50 million users. Today, it has more than 2 billion. Twitter had only been invented in 2006. Until then, blogs had been the extent of social media, a growing medium that has since democratized authority. Without an editor, anyone could publish his or her thoughts on anything. You could make yourself an authority on history, on theology, on culture, on your favorite or most hated public figure. Blogs gathered together and encouraged young pastors and theologians leaving mainline and pragmatic churches for Reformed theology.

Just a decade later, the scene looks drastically different. For influence and connection, you don't need to start a blog. You don't need to write long essays. You just need a hashtag. Or to click a "like" button. The best part of this social-media revolution is that we're hearing from voices that had too often been marginalized in older media—women and ethnic minorities, in particular.

So it's a welcome and long-overdue change. And yet, it poses a major challenge to evangelicalism, including the YRR. It's not at all apparent how they will navigate issues of misogyny, sexual abuse, and racial injustice. It would certainly seem Reformed theology and complementarianism give us ample resources to advocate for victims and fight for justice. See, for example, Piper's successor at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Jason Meyer, and his preaching on domestic abuse. So why have male leaders sometimes wielded their authority for evil? And why has Reformed theology sometimes been used as cover for racial oppression, ranging from the antebellum South to South Africa?

Changes over the last decade in institutional dynamics make this struggle harder. More so than a decade ago, YRR leaders straddle big churches and denominations where some see no problem and others see nothing but the problem. Of course, institutions can be prone to self-protection, defensive toward criticism. Institutional leaders face incentives to silence and complicity. At the same time, outsider status has its own incentives to criticize and assume the worst of institutional leaders. These disputes can draw out the worst of pride and suspicion on both sides.

Following a decade full of changes, more change can't come soon enough for many young women, minorities, and others struggling over whether they fit in the YRR. In many ways, it's not unlike the crisis that precipitated the YRR in the first place, where young evangelicals resented that they didn't learn important biblical truths in their families and churches. If millennials and Gen Y don't learn from YRR leaders how the gospel equips them to fight the injustice they see as they scroll through their Twitter timelines, will they choose to look elsewhere for leadership, purpose, and belonging?

Coalitions don't last forever. President Obama was elected after I wrote *Young, Restless, Reformed*. Can the YRR move-

ment survive the disagreement that persists regarding Black Lives Matter and President Trump? I see today on both sides of our debates over public theology that some Reformed folks find more in common with even non-Christians than with other Reformed folks. In other words, there's hardly a unified view on how justice and justification relate. No unified view on the role of the church in leading the cause against injustice in fallen world. Some say if we just preach the gospel, we'll see change. Others point out that churches have long preached the gospel and still defended, blessed, and even engaged in sins such as slavery and segregation.

This problem didn't start with the YRR. John Stott and Billy Graham disagreed over whether social justice and evangelism were two wings keeping an airplane off the ground (Stott), or whether evangelism must be the bow of the ship (Graham). At least on this point, I see much unity among YRR leaders, who agree with Graham that evangelism must be the priority. Still, that leaves a lot of room for debate over the relationship between the gospel and social justice.

## **WAY FORWARD**

If I might be so bold as to predict the future, I suspect we'll see minorities—the folks on the margins—used by God to offer and model answers to these questions. For wisdom and direction, we should look to servants of Jesus whose lives reveal the cost of discipleship. Whatever public theology most closely resembles the person and work of Jesus we see in the Gospels will captivate the hearts and minds of young Christians. Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, and proclaimed the kingdom. And so must we.

At the same time, our churches must be courageous and compassionate as they fulfill the Great Commission. Our ministry must never be less than answering the question, “What must I

do to be saved?” As Piper has said, “Christians care about all suffering, especially eternal suffering.” We follow Jesus, who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

Any durable public theology will be built on already/not yet of the kingdom. Christ has come to earth and inaugurated redemption. But not until he returns will he bring an end to all sin. So we work in hope—maybe we’ll even cure cancer. And even if we we do, we will die of something else, at least if Christ doesn’t come soon. To some the hope of redemption will make us appear pessimistic about this world, even as we love our neighbors as ourselves. At the same time, “we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved” (2 Cor. 2:15).

Deeds that bear the hope of heaven will win the day, because words have never been cheaper than on social media. Indeed, they’ve always been an unreliable guide to what Jonathan Edwards called “religious affections.” More than 250 years ago he wrote,

That persons are disposed to be abundant in talking of things of religion, may be from a good cause, and it may be from a bad one. It may be because their hearts are very full of holy affections; for “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh”; and it may be because persons’ hearts are full of religious affection which is not holy; for still out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.

Edwards scholar Gerald McDermott of Beeson Divinity School says it this way: “Never does the Bible say that the ability to talk about God is a reliable indication of true conversion” (*Seeing God*, 57). As if he were writing directly about Twitter, Luther said,

“Disputations bring with them this evil, that men’s souls are, as it were, profaned, and when they are occupied with quarrels they neglect what is most important.”

The problem with doing public theology on social media is that it exacerbates a problem that has become evident with the YRR over the last decade. Already there has been too much focus on gifting and worldly success—at the expense of character. We’ve been enamored with numbers. Sometimes, if someone has achieved ministry success, we’ve willingly overlooked immaturity, even explicitly ungodly behavior and speech. Through social media, outrage has become the currency of fame. Sometimes young Christians, even prominent pastors, grow out of it. But by enabling it in some younger leaders, we probably made the pain worse down the road.

So, what kind of public theology reveals religious affections and honors the Lord? “No more will Christ reveal his love to us,” Edwards wrote, “till we part with our dearest lusts, and till we are brought to comply with the most difficult duties, and those that we have the greatest aversion to.”

That’s the Christianity that will communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ in our “age of authenticity,” which tells us to indulge what feels good and avoid anything that makes us uncomfortable and takes us out of our safe space. For Christians, this call means we must not indulge in pornography while protesting sex slavery with a hashtag. It means not speaking harshly with your wife and daughters while sharing a #MeToo article. It means actually learning from friends of other ethnicities and not just complaining about white supremacy in the church—or lamenting the fate of Europe under Islamic immigration. It means spending time with the poor and learning of your own spiritual poverty apart from Christ instead of only resisting the empire and extolling the virtues of capitalism.

Use the hashtag, share the articles, fight white supremacy, expose the empire, appreciate capitalism. But talk is cheap. Cheaper than ever. It’s not enough that we denounce the bad, or as Edwards said,

His obedience must not only consist in negatives, or in universally avoiding wicked practices, consisting in sins of commission. Christ, in Matthew 25, represents those on the left hand, as being condemned and cursed to everlasting fire, for sins of omission, “I was hungered and ye gave me no meat.”

In short, any public theology in the name of Christ must bear the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5). It’s the vision of the apostle Paul in Romans 12:9–21:

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

For the YRR to mature in unity, our public theology must put our soteriology in practice through our ecclesiology. Forgiven in Christ, we forgive one another. We have no enemies who belong to Christ. The local church tests our theology. Does your theology guide you to love believers with different and even mistaken views? Does it drive you to teach the immature and misguided? Does it lead you to patience with the broken and sinful?

Does your theology lead you to submission to authorities in your home and in your church and in your community? Does it cause you to love your enemies in the world? With love for Christ who became a servant for us, do you feed the hungry and offer drink to the thirsty? Like Christ, do you bless those who persecute you?

That kind of Reformed theology will turn the world upside down. It will appeal to every tribe, tongue, nation, and people. It will melt the hearts of our opponents. It will sustain us in any hardship and persecution. It will direct our affections and hopes toward Christ, who is returning again.

In another 10 years, it's probable no one will talk again of the YRR. Let it not be because we refused to humble ourselves and lead each other toward the ever-challenging and ever-glorious ministry of Christ. Let it be because our youth cannot remember a time when their parents, pastors, and churches chose any other path.

### **EDITOR'S NOTE**

This article is an edited version of his breakout session from T4G 2018.

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# 7 Ministry Consequences of Calvinism



Jonathan Leeman

I will start with a slightly contentious theological claim about Calvinism relative to non-Calvinism. Then I will point to seven ministerial consequences for the Calvinist pastor that emerge from that claim. The goal of this piece is not to argue with or even to address the non-Calvinist pastor. It is to say to the Calvinist, “If you believe *this*, your ministry should look like *that*.”

## CLAIM: CALVINISTS HAVE A ROBUST VIEW OF THE MIRACLE OF THE NEW BIRTH

Here is the theological claim: I believe Calvinism creates a more a robust view of the *miracle* of the new birth.

My non-Calvinist friends, whom I hold dearly in the gospel, might not agree with that claim. They affirm the miracle, too. I take it to be intuitive, however, that we Calvinists possess, as I said, *a more robust view* of that miracle.

After all, we affirm that God must regenerate us by his Spirit *before* we can repent and believe. We don't believe that people are drowning in their sins and must reach up to grab the extended hand of salvation. We believe that people are drowned, dead, not breathing, in their sin. God then "makes us alive," as Ephesians 2 puts it, so that we then reach up to grab that extended hand of salvation. Salvation requires a miracle. Blind eyes, see! Deaf ears, hear! Lazarus, come forth!

When we proclaim the gospel, Mark Dever has said, we're evangelizing the graveyard.

The movement from unbelief to belief, for the non-Calvinist, requires a person to travel a shorter distance. He moves from unconvinced to convinced, from unbelieving to believing, through some internal thought process or a persuasive argument, almost like you would be convinced about anything else in life. *And then* the person is born again, regenerated, made new. The miracle, it seems to me, is a bit less miraculous because it depends upon *our* work too, not just God's.

## **CONSEQUENCE 1: PATIENCE IN PASTORING**

A number of consequences follow for our ministry and church practice.

First, the fact that you believe *God* must save, pastor, should make you patient in the ministry.

- "You know all about my teaching, my way of life, my...patience" (2 Tim. 3:10).
- "Preach the word...with great patience" (2 Tim. 4:2)

Pastor, God calls you to "hard work" and "sleepless nights" (2 Cor. 6:5). He calls you to be shrewd (Mt. 10:6), wise (Col. 4:5), persuasive (2 Cor. 5:11).

At the same time, you know the new birth and spiritual growth doesn't depend on your gimmicks, your charisma, your humor, your intelligence. You are called to plant and water, knowing that God alone can give the growth (1 Cor. 3:6-7).

This fact should make you profoundly patient in the ministry. It should relieve your anxiety and help you get a good night's sleep. You're not a savior. You cannot save.

So this Sunday you preach. Next Sunday you preach. The following Sunday you preach. Maybe God will give the growth. Maybe he won't. You can't control that. You know you have no choice but to be patient. He'll do it in his time, in his way.

Pastor, your Calvinism should make you patient.

## **CONSEQUENCE 2: RELIANCE ON THE WORD**

Our temptation, of course, is to build ministries on the things we can see, bodies we can count, laughing audiences we can hear. And such ministries often yield quick results.

My friend was invited to give several talks at a youth group retreat. Beforehand, the youth pastor told my friend to fill his talks with jokes, otherwise the youth wouldn't listen. And if his jokes didn't work, he should try "roasting" the youth pastor himself. The kids would love that. Arriving at the retreat, several teenagers repeated the exact same advice: tell us funny stories, and if that doesn't work, roast the youth pastor.

Do jokes give life to the dead? Does roasting the youth pastor help the blind to see?

Some humor is fine. God can use it, just like he uses charisma and powerful personalities and smart preachers or any number of things. But remember what Jesus said: flesh gives birth to flesh, while Spirit gives birth to spirit (John 3:6). The Spirit gives life through the Word (Ezek. 37:1-12), not through human wisdom.

Pastor, what are you relying on? What's most weighty in your ministry? Rely on the Word, which is the wisdom of God. It alone will call that youth group, and your church, out of death and into life.

### **CONSEQUENCE 3: CLARITY IN CONVERSIONS**

If the new birth depends entirely on a miracle of God—not on the human processes of coming to believe—we will expect change. Real, substantial, concrete, identifiable change.

Many things in a new convert's life may remain the same. Sin will continue. Yet Calvinists expect that, amidst the weeds, we'll always see new, you-can't-miss-them flowers. *God* has saved the person, and the Spirit is not weak. His work is not meager.

As such, Calvinism leaves less room for nominal Christianity, easy-believism, “carnal Christianity,” Jesus-is-Savior-but-not-Lord. It doesn't say that Christians will always look morally better than non-Christians. It says people will be changed by becoming Christians. God changes them. They'll look better than they used to. Even the thief on the cross rebuked the other thief.

Pastor, your Calvinism should clarify conversion and your sense of who is converted. It clarifies what a Christian is.

### **CONSEQUENCE 4: CLEAR LINES OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP**

If conversion is clarified, then the lines of church membership will clarify, too. The idea of a church member whose life looks just like world doesn't make sense. The idea of a church member who never attends doesn't make sense. Non-Calvinists might affirm this as well, but the Calvinist who affirms the monergistic miracle of the new birth should insist on it.

We expect that God's people can be identified. We expect their professions to be credible.

One academic author recently argued that we expect too much by asking for “credible” professions of faith before baptism. He worried that insisting on credible professions would blur the line between conversion and sanctification. I appreciate his concern. Pastors can demand too much. That said, are we to baptize into the church people whose professions are *not credible*? “Well, you don’t seem like a Christian to me because you’re still living with your girlfriend and refuse to move out. But you’re professing faith, so, yes, I’ll baptize you.”

Perhaps this author was not a Calvinist. He specifically said the only repentance we should require is the repentance of belief. Nothing more. I don’t know his soteriology, but I do know that a Calvinist believes that, since the Holy Spirit births our repentance, that conversion involves not just the believing mind, but the heart, the will, the whole person. The whole person changes directions, even as the ongoing battle with sin remains.

A local church’s task is then to affirm credible professions of faith through baptism and the Supper, those two ways we make membership visible. Further, we expect those members to be attending and repenting. This is not perfectionism. Christians still sin, but when they sin they repent.

Pastors, your Calvinism should cause you to take church membership seriously, and to work at clarifying the lines between the inside and the outside of the church. See also Steve Wellum’s article here.

## **CONSEQUENCE 5: CONFIDENCE TO PRACTICE CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

If Calvinism yields a robust view of the miracle of the new birth, which in turn clarifies conversion and church membership, then we should possess a new confidence in practicing church discipline. As I said a moment ago, we expect new flowers to sprout

up amidst the weeds whenever God is at work. If there are no flowers, our job is clear. Correct, gently and slowly over time, yes, but, eventually, we must remove the unrepentant, as both Jesus and Paul instruct (Matt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5).

Not only that, we'll be less tempted to keep false professors and nominal Christians inside the church. Conversion—faith and repentance—doesn't depend on our being nice, our being winsome enough, our being perceived as not mean. We must correct, but change depends upon God. Remove that conviction and there's less incentive to remove a person. You'll want to pacify. Keep the sinner's guard down. Be nice. Maybe he or she will come around.

A Calvinist, on the other hand, should be utterly confident that “handing a person over to Satan” really can bring people to repentance (1 Cor. 5:5). It “works” because that's how God set it up, even if it doesn't fit with our intuitions.

Further, if a church does mistakenly remove someone from membership, then we don't need to worry that such an individual will be *unsaved*. He or she will persevere.

## **CONSEQUENCE 6: CONFIDENCE TO EVANGELIZE**

Calvinism should also give us a confidence to evangelize, even when the world hates us.

Non-Calvinism makes sense in a nominal Christian culture. In such a culture, there are social benefits that come with being a Christian. It's considered respectable. You'll meet clients at church. Most of your friends call themselves Christians. It makes you one of “them.” And so on.

In such a nominal context, evangelism is...easier. People won't call you a bigot or a hater or intolerant. You don't have to define “sin.” You can appeal to the immediate and temporal benefits of being a Christian—purpose, a fulfilled life, a sense of meaning, a better marriage, an eased conscience—without

emphasizing the costs of following Jesus. And people will respond—in large numbers!

But now turn that society against Christianity. Increase the costs. Make everyone who is a Christian look like a fanatic and a hater for believing this stuff. Harden people's hearts. Convince them they know exactly what Christianity is, because the world has tried that, and it's oppressive and misogynistic and homophobic and racist.

Now, how will you help people to share the gospel in *that* environment? To pound their head against *that* wall?

I propose: remind them that it is *God* who saves. Remind them our task is nothing less than evangelizing the graveyard. And it has always been that way. Things actually haven't gotten any harder. We're just more aware now of how opposed the flesh is to God. As the Lord encouraged Paul, "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9–10).

God has people out there. Speak with Jesus voice broadly, and his sheep will hear him and come.

## **CONSEQUENCE 7: TRUST THAT THE LORD WILL WORK IN OTHER CHURCHES**

When you are convinced that the new birth is a God-given miracle, when you realize that it's not your wisdom which brings people to life, you just might be more willing to trust God's work through other voices and other churches. If he can work through you, then he can work through that church down the road. You're not in competition with them. You can pray for them, support them, partner with them.

Maybe, you'll even be less interested in starting a second service or a second campus and more willing to either plant or to at-

tend that small church down the road that preaches faithfully but could use some help. The kingdom doesn't advance only through the things you can control. "The wind blows wherever it pleases," said Jesus. "So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

## **CONCLUSION**

My non-Calvinist pastor friends will affirm all seven things above as good. Praise God. I'm not writing for them. I'm saying your Calvinism, brother pastor, should be rocket fuel in your tank in all these ways. Light it!

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# The Five Points of Calvinism and Your Church's Sunday Meeting



Matt Merker

It's winter, which means each afternoon I make myself a cup of hot tea. I like it strong. If it doesn't steep long enough, all you've got is brown water.

The best worship services are like a mug of well-steeped tea. They're rich with the flavor of Christ-exalting biblical truth.

After all, corporate worship both reflects and reinforces our theology. On the one hand, what we do when the church gathers on Sunday morning flows out of our core doctrinal commitments. Our theology "flavors" the meeting, like my tea bag transforms water into tea. On the other hand, the congregation's public worship forms us as believers. If the worship is unbiblical, it may *deform* us. But when our worship is biblical, it should continually *conform* us to the image of Christ. To continue my tea analogy

(are you getting thirsty?), what we “drink” in a worship service will either undermine or bolster our spiritual health.

With this in mind, it’s vital for those of us who hold to a reformed or “Calvinistic” doctrine of salvation to consider if our corporate worship reflects our professed soteriology. Have the earth-shattering doctrines of grace sufficiently steeped into our services?

In their recent book, *Lovin’ On Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*, Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth demonstrate that much of what goes on in evangelical services today has roots in two sources: 1960s–70s Pentecostalism and the 1980s–90s church growth movement. There are notable exceptions, of course, and it would take a whole different article to flesh out the implications of that history. But if they’re right (and I think they are), it means that there may be some Pentecostal and pragmatic assumptions built into our worship services. For sure, we have much to learn from other theological traditions. But self-consciously reformed services should reflect reformed priorities.

If we claim to hold to the doctrines of grace, do our weekly meetings confirm that claim? Let’s walk through the five points of Calvinism and explore how each one can—and should—inform our corporate worship.

## **TOTAL DEPRAVITY**

Human beings are “inclined to evil, dead in their hearts, and slaves to sin . . . neither willing nor able to return to God” (Canons of Dort, III.3; see Ps 51:5, Eph 2:1–3). If we believe this is true, we should declare it in our services. God is glorified when we help believers appreciate the depth of the depravity from which we’ve been rescued. Likewise, it serves unbelievers to tell them honestly what’s wrong with their hearts.

In other words, our main goal in corporate worship shouldn’t be to provide a generic jolt of inspiration or an injection of pos-

itive thinking. It should be to magnify the Savior who overcame our cosmic treason against him.

One helpful way to reflect the reality of depravity in worship is a prayer of confession. The *Westminster Directory for Public Worship* (1645) urges a pastor to use such a prayer each Sunday to “get his hearers’ hearts to be rightly affected with their sins, that they may all mourn in sense thereof before the Lord, and hunger and thirst after the grace of God in Jesus Christ.”

Recently, a brother at my church said the following in his prayer of confession: “Lord, not only could we not serve you in our sin, we wouldn’t even have wanted to if we could.” Praying along with him, I was shocked—floored—convicted— and then my heart was warmed by how God has conquered my rebellion in Christ.

To those who may object that a prayer of confession may turn away non-Christian visitors because they’ll find it overly negative and depressing, I beg to differ for two reasons. First, even if that reason is true, Scripture calls us to prioritize edifying the people of God in our services, not making visitors comfortable (see 1 Cor 14). But second, unbelievers often *thank* us at my church for using a weekly prayer of confession. “Finally, a church service where everyone else admits they’re as messed up as I am.”

*Other suggestions:*

- Read the Ten Commandments corporately. Expose people to God’s law and explain that though we fall infinitely short of his standard, there is mercy in Christ.
- Sing hymns that are honest about the problem of sin, that glory in the depths of what Christ has done to forgive us, and that invite believers and non-believers alike to repentance.
- Regularly read and sing penitential Psalms, such as Psalms 51 and 130.

## UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION

God decreed to save an undeserving people “by sheer grace,” on the basis of his “good pleasure” alone (Canons of Dort I.7; see Eph 1:3–6). This doctrine implies that God takes the initiative in all of his dealings with us—including our worship of him. Our worship is a gift we offer back to God, but God himself is its ultimate source and benefactor (Eph 2:10).

One way to acknowledge God’s gracious initiative in our services is to include a scriptural call to worship. Consider beginning the assembly with a summons from God’s Word to adore the God who speaks. This simple practice subtly signals that it is God who reveals himself to us and calls us into a reconciled relationship with him.

If we believe God has freely chosen to deliver a people by his mercy, then a substantive prayer of praise belongs in our services as well. It strikes me as strange when I attend a church that supposedly holds to reformed theology, yet only has one or two perfunctory prayers. A prayer of praise helps us marry doxology and theology. It shouldn’t be a dry, jargon-laden recitation of truth, but a stirring proclamation of God’s attributes, perfections, and deeds—as we see modeled in so many of the Psalms of praise.

### *Other suggestions:*

- Include a moment of silence before or after a prayer or Scripture reading, which can help believers ponder God’s transcendence.
- Analyze your most-used songs and evaluate if they major in declarative praise (“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty... Immortal, invisible, God only wise”) or if they focus on our response to God (“I worship you... we sing to you... we look to you”). Both are biblical and important, but the former should be our meat and potatoes and the latter our dessert. If our songs reference us more than God, then we have no business calling our worship “God-centered.”

## PARTICULAR REDEMPTION / DEFINITE ATONEMENT

The glory of the doctrine of particular redemption is that Christ died for his chosen people, the church (Eph 5:25). Those the Father elects are those for whom the Son atones, and those to whom the Spirit applies the benefits of Christ's work. They're all one and the same.

Since this is the case, reformed pastors must work to counteract the trend in evangelical worship toward individualism. A worship service isn't a concert, where music fans share their experience in a darkened hall with a group of *anonymous* others who all have the same tastes. Instead, it's a covenantal family meeting, with a group of *known* others who differ from each other in a thousand ways but all love the same Savior.

In other words, a reformed service is one where the church—the bride for whom Jesus died—is visible, as it were, to itself.

One way we can highlight this reality is by emphasizing the corporate nature of the ordinances. Baptism mainly isn't a notch on one's individual discipleship belt, and the Lord's Supper isn't a private "me and Jesus" moment. Baptism is where a believer takes on the family name. The Supper is where believers sit down to the family meal. If your church has a covenant and/or statement of faith, consider having the members recite some or all of it when preparing for the Lord's Table as a way of reaffirming their commitment to one another.

Likewise, reformed churches would do well to heed Ephesians 5:19, where Paul instructs us to address "one another" in song even as we make melody to the Lord. Praising God is one way we edify the body. We should select songs that provide a vehicle for Christians to encourage one another. We should teach that although God is the primary audience of our praise, singing is in another sense part of each believer's personal ministry to the whole church.

*Other suggestions:*

- Keep the lights on during church services to fight against a production/entertainment mindset and to allow church members to see one another.
- When singing, regularly drop out the instruments so that the voices of the redeemed are the main auditory focus.

## **IRRESISTIBLE GRACE**

When God gives us new life, the Holy Spirit “penetrates into the inmost being, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised” (Canons of Dort, III/IV.11). How? By his Word. When God speaks, his Word doesn’t return to him empty (Isa 55:11).

Simply put, this means that a reformed church service should be saturated with Scripture. Our job is to devote ourselves to the public reading of the Word (1 Tim 4:13) and to preach the good news faithfully. God alone changes hearts.

In light of this, I find it ironic that, at least it seems to me, one trademark of seeker-sensitive or “attractional” services is *less* time spent explaining the Bible and *more* time for supposedly relevant features such as skits and special music. There’s a stark difference between making our services intelligible for unbelievers (a worthy goal: see 1 Cor 14:23–25) and withholding from them the very thing that God normally uses to draw people to salvation: his Word. We have something better to offer unbelievers than a warm feeling of inspiration. We have the gospel by which God calls the dead to life.

In the *Westminster Directory of Public Worship*, a large group of 17<sup>th</sup> century Calvinists (many of whom we regard as our theological heroes) instructed churches to read a whole chapter from both the Old and New Testaments each Lord’s Day. That may seem a tall order today, and my church doesn’t follow that guideline ex-

actly. But I would submit that hearing long portions of Scripture read, especially when done with excellence, is an easily acquired taste. Ligon Duncan has said, “make the public reading of the Word an *event*.” Read with the expectation that God will use his Word to transform people—and you might be surprised to find that folks listen up.

*Other suggestions:*

- Prioritize expositional preaching. Always show how the text points to Christ.
- Sing Psalms regularly, since the gift of music can help us memorize God’s effectual Word.

## **PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS**

My friend Matthew Westerholm has argued that it’s shortsighted for pastors and song leaders to see a church service primarily as helping Christians “get through the next week.” We’ve got to zoom out the camera lens: we are preparing pilgrims for eternity.

The doctrine of perseverance safeguards the biblical assurance that no one will snatch us out of Christ’s hand (John 10:28). Those he has called, he will keep until the end (Jude 1, 24). And yet, our Calvinistic forebears also understood that God uses means to hold us fast: “God preserves, continues, and completes this work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments” (Canons of Dort V.14).

Therefore, we should plan our Lord’s Day services to help Christians endure to the end. Worship is discipleship: through the elements of a church meeting, we are equipping one another with the God-centered view of life necessary to survive as sojourners doing battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Practically speaking, this means our services should address the reality of suffering. Sing in a minor key from time to time. Use

a pastoral prayer of lament: not only is it appropriate to pray for all sorts of needs (1 Tim 2:1, 1 Pet 5:7), a prayer like this shows that it's OK for real, faithful Christians to experience pain.

Our people need far more than 75 minutes of hype. They need to encounter the sovereign God who is strong enough to guide them through the valley of the shadow of death.

*Other suggestions:*

- Sing hymns and read Scriptures that help believers look forward to the new heavens and new earth.
- Use the Lord's Supper not only as a time of remembrance, but of anticipation for the wedding supper of the Lamb that is to come.
- Include prayers, scriptures, and songs that express lament over the brokenness of the world and longing for Christ's reign of justice.

## **CONCLUSION**

Finally, pastor, take heart. The very truths we've been discussing remind us that God doesn't finally approve of our efforts or make them fruitful because our worship services are perfectly steeped with the rich aroma of reformed theology. He will bring glory to his name despite our errors, imperfections, and frailties. That's why we can plan Sunday's service with confidence. We should strive for faithfulness, yes—but with certainty that his good purposes will prevail.

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# Calvinism & Counseling



Patti Withers

**T**he path to Christ-likeness can be messy. As believers, we often long for our sanctification to look like a rocket shooting up, progressing ever higher and higher. But more often than not, it feels like three painful steps forward and two shockingly easy steps back. This is certainly true in my life, and I've found that it's also true for the women who meet with me for counseling. I've served on our church staff for 11 years, dividing my time between women's ministry and biblical counseling, and it's an honor to walk with struggling sisters, to see the changes and growth in their lives, and to be used by God as a part of that process.

Sometimes, however, the slowness of the process can tempt us to discouragement and fear, both for me and for the sister receiving counseling. The reality of the "two steps back" can hinder our ability to see the "three steps forward." It's because of this that I rely heavily on the truth of God's sovereignty in counseling, particularly on those aspects of his sovereignty that intersect with the doctrine of sanctification. While the Bible is brimming with references to God's sovereignty in sanctification, I've found the following passages of Scripture particularly helpful as I counsel and disciple others.

## **THOSE WE COUNSEL ARE CREATED FOR GOOD WORKS (EPHESIANS 2:10).**

The truth about my struggling sister is that she's a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) who has been created by God for the purpose of doing good works. It's also true that God has pre-prepared those good works for her.

There's such a wealth of help and encouragement here! As a counselor, I'm completely incapable of accomplishing any change for the good in my counselee, and I can't *make* her do any of the good that she ought. Thankfully, the burden of her change doesn't land on me. We can both rest knowing that she will change because she has been created by God for the very purpose of walking in his pre-prepared good works. It's his sovereignty at work in her life from beginning to end.

## **THOSE WE COUNSEL ARE PREDESTINED TO LOOK LIKE JESUS (ROMANS 8:29).**

All the doubts we're tempted to believe when we see slowness to change, all the discouragements that arise amid persistent sin-struggles, all the fear and worry and fretting and hopelessness—all of it is swallowed up in this simple truth: the sister I am counseling is predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus.

Before time began, God, in love, predestined her to be adopted as his daughter (Eph. 1:4), and to be conformed to the image of her Elder Brother, Jesus. Who is able to thwart God's plan for his children? If he has purposed that she should look like Jesus, then she must.

## **THOSE WE COUNSEL NEED THE TRUTH SPOKEN IN LOVE (EPHESIANS 4:15).**

While it's true that God will cause the believing counselee to look like Jesus, it's also true that God uses means to accomplish this

end. Biblical counseling is one of those means, so as a counselor I must be ready to speak the truth to my counselee in a loving way.

We must aim for a delicate balance when doing this. If love isn't driving my spoken truths, then I'm in danger of being nothing more than a "noisy gong" (1 Cor. 13:1). But if I *never* speak hard truths into the counselee's life, then my counsel is reduced to mere sentimentality and is therefore not loving. Trusting in God's sovereignty frees me from both frustration that may drive me to loveless truth-speaking *and* fear that may tempt me to shrink back from speaking truth altogether.

### **THE LORD WILL COMPLETE THE GOOD WORK HE BEGAN (PHILIPPIANS 1:6).**

What a sweet promise to know that the Lord—who sovereignly began the good work in the counselee's life—is the one who will bring it to completion. Knowing this frees me from the temptation to coerce my sister into obedience, or to fret because she isn't currently obeying as she ought. It frees me from any temptation to fear that she will never grow or change.

This truth is also a wonderful balm to the counselee who is typically discouraged and keenly aware of her need for change. Is God not able? Is he not faithful? Where did Paul's surety about the completion of the Philippians' sanctification come from? Precisely from knowing that the sovereign God of the universe is the one who *began* the work in the Philippians' lives and would also be the one to *complete* it.

### **THE LORD WILL ACCOMPLISH GROWTH IN THOSE WE COUNSEL (PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13).**

I regularly bring counsees to these verses because they help us understand both our responsibility and God's sovereignty in the

process of becoming more Christ-like. First, these verses remind us that we are to be working out our “own salvation with fear and trembling.” Not that we are in any way working *for* our salvation, since Jesus has already accomplished that on the cross. Rather, we are to be working to put to death what is still earthly in us (Col. 3:5) and by doing so we demonstrate that we have been saved.

These verses then explain to us that the power we possess to change is rooted in God powerfully and sovereignly working in us. And what is he working? His own will and good pleasure! C. H. Spurgeon explained it this way, “It gives God pleasure to see you holy, it is his delight to see you self-denying. . . . Depend upon it then, since he is pleased with the result, and has put forth his own strong hand to bring it about, you, as you work, will not work at a peradventure, but in absolute certainty of success.” Because of God’s sovereign work, our progress toward holiness is inevitable.

### **THE LORD WILL WIPE AWAY EVERY TEAR FROM EVERY EYE (REVELATION 21:1-4).**

Not every problem will be resolved this side of heaven. Not every marriage will be restored, not every depression will be lifted, not every fear will be permanently thrown off. And while there must be an evident, ever-increasing Christlikeness in every believer’s life, the struggle with sin and discouragement will mark us until our mortality is swallowed up by immortality.

That’s why it’s so important to point the counselee to the reality that awaits her in glory. The Lord will sovereignly keep all of his children all the way home; therefore, we can endure in this life and even have hope. Our difficulties lose some of their sting as we meditate on the truth that we will spend eternity free from sorrow and sin.

Our path to Christ-likeness is indeed slow, and at times even imperceptible. But because of God’s sovereignty, we can have

great hope that we, and those we are counseling, will become increasingly Christlike. This is a steadfast hope, not simply wishful thinking. This hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God himself (1 Thess. 5:23–24), and it will never disappoint.

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# Five Marks of a Calvinist Pastor's Ministry



Aaron Menikoff

**T**he label “Calvinist pastor” is something of a Rorschach test. Some see a fiery preacher who always talks about the wrath of God and ignores evangelism. Others picture an arrogant theologian who spends more time with dead, Protestant reformers than living church members. I’m not sure how many people envision a humble, gentle, evangelizing servant with beaming confidence in the Word of God.

I wish more did.

I don’t like the term, “Calvinist pastor.” *Christian* pastor is a better title. Nonetheless, I understand there are those who do not affirm the doctrines of grace like I do. The last thing I want to do is imply one must embrace Calvinism to be a good pastor. Rather, in this article, I simply aim to reflect on how an affirmation of the doctrines of grace can spur a pastor on to greater degrees of faithfulness.

Just to be clear, the heart of Calvinism is God's initiative in salvation. It begins with my utter inability to save myself and ends with God's promised preservation of my repentance and faith. In the middle is the work of Christ, dying in the place of all who would ever repent and believe. A pastor who affirms these truths will minister out of them as well. He does so in a number of ways. I'll mention just five overlapping marks of a Calvinist pastor.

### **HE LIVES FOR GOD'S GLORY**

Calvinism is often referred to as "big God theology." Verses like Isaiah 48:11 loom large. The Lord says, "My glory I will not give to another." For his role as Creator and Redeemer, God deserves all the glory.

Far be it for a pastor with such a high-view of the sovereignty of God to draw attention to himself. A God-centered mind is fixed on shining a spotlight on the Lord. A God-centered pastor is quick to parrot the words John the Baptist spoke of Jesus, "He must increase, I must decrease."

This affects how pastors present themselves in the pulpit, in private, or on social media. In a word, they make much of Christ, not themselves. They heartily accept praise and encouragement. But they're sure to clarify that whatever good they accomplish (and pastors do much good), is God at work in them (Phil. 2:13).

### **HE MODELS HUMILITY**

Calvinists are rightly known for affirming the doctrine of total depravity. Before Christ, we may not have been as bad as we could have been, but we were too bad to choose Christ. We needed God to intervene (John 15:16; 1 John 4:19).

Someone aware of what he's been saved *from* will never forget it. An awareness of past sins will fuel a humble heart. Paul told Ti-

tus the church should avoid quarreling and be gentle (3:2). Why? “For we ourselves were once foolish” (3:3). Good works flow from the heart of someone who knows he’s been saved.

The Calvinist pastor never says, “I’ve arrived,” and he’s quick to confess his sin. He welcomes criticism, too. He even invites it. He’s so aware of the depth of God’s grace, and he’s eager to extend grace to others.

### **HE EXPRESSES JOY**

There ought to be a real happiness that marks the lips and life of the Calvinist pastor. Of course, it should mark *every* pastor! But, again, since the Calvinist is sure he didn’t cooperate one iota with God in salvation, it’s fair to expect gratitude bursting forth, like a phoenix, from his redeemed heart.

I have a friend, a dear older saint, who used to remind me to smile when I preach. “Jesus died for you, Aaron, why don’t you smile more?” he would ask. I suppose as a young preacher my mind was burdened with getting the text right, communicating it powerfully, and generally doing a good job. Nonetheless, my brother made a good point. My mind was on myself, not Christ, and joylessness abounded.

The importance of being joyful is something every pastor needs to hear. Still, there’s something unusually troubling about a pastor who believes in God’s meticulous providence but lets the cares of the world weigh him down.

### **HE PERSUADES TENDERLY**

A faithful pastor is always encouraging others to pick the better way. The unbeliever should choose the way of faith that leads to eternal life. But even Christians have decisions to make. The path of holiness is crooked this side of heaven. Like a shepherd nudg-



ing sheep in the right direction, a pastor urges his people to move toward the Lord. Pastors persuade.

The Calvinist pastor knows all the nudging in the world won't help unless the Lord changes the heart. Just as God had to open the heart of Lydia so she would "pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14), the Spirit has to move within our hearts before we'll take a step Godward.

It's tempting to aim for behavior modification. By raising our voice or showcasing our knowledge, pastors can intimidate people. But not only is this wicked, it doesn't finally work. A parent who screams at his child may find the little one more compliant. But compliance isn't the goal. We aim for changed hearts.

God's Word is a pastor's crook. We may speak passionately, boldly, and with authority—but we are never to manipulate. Yelling is not our crook. Tears are not our crook. Prizes are not our crook. Gently but with conviction, we wield God's Word. We persuade tenderly.

## **HE WALKS IN HOLINESS**

Calvinist pastors don't have the market cornered on holiness. This is the mark of a Christian pastor. But it's also true that a Reformed understanding of the cross-work of Christ demands the robust pursuit of holiness. Let me explain.

Many Christians today (maybe even most) would argue Christ died for all in order to make it possible for all to be saved. The cross, they say, makes salvation a compelling option. However, someone who affirms limited atonement—or, better, particular redemption—insists Christ died to completely accomplish the salvation of a particular people, his church.

What does this have to do with holiness? The Bible joins together the accomplished work of Christ on the cross with the ongoing work of the Spirit in the heart. The two cannot be separated.

Christ didn't just die to save the church from hell, he died to send the church down the path of sanctification.

- “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live for righteousness” (1 Peter 2:14).
- Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14).

The pastor committed to the efficacious atonement of Christ ought to be just as committed to personal holiness. He won't neglect to examine himself (2 Cor. 13:5). He'll be sure there are others in his life exhorting him to godliness so that his own heart will not be hardened by the “deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13).

## **CONCLUSION**

Calvin (who I am sure is more than a little troubled by so many people calling themselves “Calvinists”) urged everyone to be faithful in their calling. “Every individual's sphere of life,” he argued, “is a post assigned him by the Lord.”

If you are a pastor, this is a post to which God has appointed you. By all means, tend to your doctrine. But, by God's grace, don't forget to tend your hearts, too.

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# Calvinist Pastors and Non-Calvinist Churches: Candidating, Pastoring, and Moving On



David Schrock

**W**hen asked to introduce myself, I don't typically identify myself as a Calvinist. But maybe that was the problem.

In 2009, I began preaching at a church near the seminary where I was studying. Within six months, my pulpit supply turned into an interim role as preaching pastor, which then resulted in being called as senior pastor.

During the candidating process, the church heard me preach dozens of times, the search committee asked me countless questions, the people got to know me and my family, and the subject of Calvinism never came up—except once.

In a conversation during my interim preaching, I learned a previous interim had been “terminated” for his Calvinist views. This dismissal, however, resulted in a quick “re-hire” and as far as

I knew the interim pastor served the remainder of his time without incident.

In my naïvete, I assumed this course correction meant that while the church was not Calvinistic, neither was it antagonistic toward Calvinism. After all, they'd seen the error of their ways, and brought this brother-pastor back to preach. Right? Wrong.

That assumption was a mistake, one that would have ongoing repercussions for the next five years of my life.

In what follows, I want to share a few things that might be helpful for you—Calvinist pastor—if the Lord leads you to a church that doesn't celebrate the doctrines of grace. At the same time, for any non-Calvinist listening in on the conversation, I pray the reflections given here might spur us all toward love and good deeds, greater understanding and commitment, love for God, and love for one another.

## **NON-CALVINISTS VS. ANTI-CALVINISTS**

Fast forward five years and the church had taken a decided turn toward anti-Calvinism.

In our church, I'd attempted to navigate a positive vision of gospel-centered, missions-minded ministry. This meshed well with the SBC's 2008 agreement to disagree on the finer points of Calvinism, while majoring on the gospel and the need to reach the lost.<sup>23</sup> Sadly, all such endeavors spiraled downward.

Over time, it became clear that there's a great difference between non-Calvinists and *anti*-Calvinists. Therefore, any counsel I might give here depends on what kind of non-Calvinist you find leading (or influencing) your church. This difference is about far more than doctrine; it's about tone, temperament, and a willingness to unify over other shared doctrines like Scripture, salvation, and service.

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<sup>23</sup> The official title of this document was "Truth, Trust, and Testimony in a Time of Tension." Available online at <http://www.sbclife.net/article/2207/truth-trust-and-testimony-in-a-time-of-tension>.

If you find yourself in a situation where the tide has turned *against* Calvinism, then you're in a much different place than if you're in a church where the doctrines of grace are relatively unknown. Moreover, you must be aware of the influences—denominational or otherwise—that surround your church.

Simply put, pastoral ministry is no longer purely local. I've found that virtual voices and social media sources have an exaggerated and typically deleterious impact on the members of our churches. Therefore, Calvinist pastor, it's wise to know what kind of non-Calvinist you are shepherding and what voices they're listening to.

Even more, the most important thing you can do in serving the Lord faithfully is to build relationships with your people, so that when debates about doctrine come—and they will come—your care for them will disprove the caricatures they find online. Though your relational efforts may still not overcome this theological divide, for the integrity of your ministry and the good of the church, personal ministry is key.

## WHERE DO ANTI-CALVINISTS COME FROM?

Okay, so what happened at my church? What brought about this unhappy conversion? As I reflect, three elements contributed to the rise of anti-Calvinism in our church.

### 1. The Internet

Never before have people trusted themselves or strangers more than with the advent of the internet. Sadly, as our church considered the merits and demerits of the doctrines of grace, a chief consultant was Google. As a result, instead of finding irenic voices that could explain the historic debate, Google searches led to skewed sources that unfavorably misrepresented the other side.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Sadly, I discovered this after the fact as some church members showed me the emails that linked to these sources—one of whom, humorously, misspelled the topic of Calvinism.

In general, pastors need to appreciate the way our heroes of old preached, prayed, loved, and stayed in congregations that were not impacted by the information age. By faithful exposition of the Scriptures, they led their people into a greater understanding of biblical truth without the intrusion of internet hotheads. Today, however, circumstances have changed, and the internet may force Calvinist pastors in non-Calvinist churches to give an account for their doctrine.

This doesn't mean the internet has ruined the "subversive" operations of Calvinist pastors sneaking into non-Calvinist churches. It does mean that Calvinist and non-Calvinist Christians alike will have a far more difficult time sitting under the Word of God together when both sides appeal to the nuclear arsenal of the World Wide Web.

## **2. External Leaders**

When members begin to question the fidelity of their pastor's teaching, they rarely (regrettably) go to their pastor. This is true in general, but perhaps more so when it comes to Calvinism. Often, concerned members will seek out former pastors or outside help, which may or may not help at all!

When outside consultants and denominational workers feed fears instead of understanding, the opportunity for Christians to grow in biblical truth and love for others who don't share their theological convictions is lost. Outside sources could help the situation if they pointed concerned members back to their pastor. In my own situation, however, these outside "experts" often fed the false narrative of Calvinist pastors and their hidden agendas.

## **3. Weak Relationships**

Still, above these two external factors, anti-Calvinists exist mainly because of the loss of relationships between Calvinists and non-Calvinists. As I look back on my five years in a non-Calvinist church, I'm deeply aware of how little time I spent with people.

Finishing a doctoral degree during this same season, coupled with a personal inclination toward the study and not the front porch, made my relationships too weak to sustain the weight of this theological divide. While many friendships were strong *before* the onslaught of internet-fed accusations, they simply couldn't withstand the pressure when arguments came.

Just as our nation in the Internet Age has experienced increased political separation and hostility, so have Calvinists and Non-Calvinists in the local church. Religious zealots can be found on both sides, those who prize their so-called “camp” more than their common salvation in Christ. Of course, the information age only increases this challenge.

Calvinist pastors in non-Calvinist churches, therefore, must foster relationships so that the church is not ripped apart by doctrinal disagreements. They must teach that personal relationships are more valuable and worthwhile than virtual relationships, and then they must go out and model this truth. In my five years at a non-Calvinist church, I didn't establish relationships deep enough to withstand the onslaught of anti-Calvinist voices, and as a result my time there was cut short.

Under God's sovereignty, I see the wisdom of my departure from this church—for the good of that church and the grace of God in a new pastoral setting. Still, my heart grieves at how this non-Calvinist church came under the influence of anti-Calvinist voices and how my own ministry lacked the relational capital to shepherd this congregation well.

Nonetheless, God teaches from our failures and in what follows I want to share five points that might help a Calvinist pastor serve a non-Calvinist congregation.

## **EMBRACE A NEW TULIP**

If Calvinist pastors are to serve with grace and truth, they need to learn a new TULIP. This is true for Calvinist pastors candidating

at a non-Calvinist church as well as those who currently serve a non-Calvinist church. In one sense, I despise the harsh divisions these labels bring, because they fall prey to and reinforce the stereotypes of these terms, but for sake of brevity, I will use them.

## **1. Trust in God's Sovereignty**

### *Candidating Pastor*

Don't hide your doctrinal beliefs just to get the job. I don't think I did this when I candidated, but I've spent more than a few restless nights trying to recall my motivations in 2009. Did I intentionally deceive the church I grew to love as I went from pulpit supply to interim to pastor? I don't think so, but that was the repeated accusation as my tenure ended, one that I have had to consider and submit to the Lordship of Christ (cf. Psalm 139).

That said, if you're a pastoral candidate, trust God for his placement and don't hide your doctrinal convictions. If the church doesn't have the theological acumen to ask you about it, bring it up with gentleness and patience. Show them how you will teach these doctrines and how important they are to you. (This will vary with each candidate and will show why one Calvinist can lead a non-Calvinist church and another cannot). Far better to "disqualify" yourself in the candidating process than to receive a call to a place where theological debate will follow immediately.

### *Current Pastor*

Don't question God's sovereignty. Whether you knew what you were getting into or not, take heart. God knew. God knows. You are where he put you.

Therefore, trust in God's sovereign rule in your life and ministry. Indeed, if your doctrine is only a theory, it will lead to murmuring and envy. But if God's sovereignty is your meat and drink,



it will supply you with all you need to shepherd God's church—whether he calls you to stay or go.

## 2. Unconditionally Love the Church

### *Candidating Pastor*

Calvinism is not the gospel. I believe it's the best expression of the gospel and that the doctrines of grace motivate missions, equip churches, humble saints, and retain the truths of the gospel across generations. But predestination and effectual calling aren't the message that saves. Christ crucified and raised from the dead is (1 Cor. 15:1–8).

Therefore, don't deceive yourself into thinking your Calvinism will save a church. The non-Calvinist church doesn't *need* your Calvinism. They need the gospel. Therefore, you'll best love them by pointing them to Christ and the whole counsel of God. Yes, I believe this includes the doctrines of grace, but keep the gospel at the center, and make the church (under God) call you or reject you based upon your fervency for Christ, not your devotion to Calvinism.

### *Current Pastor*

You don't need Calvinism to be a faithful pastor. Again, I believe the whole counsel of God teaches the doctrines of grace, and if God gives you time, you should love God's people by teaching them what the Bible teaches about salvation. That said, if your church is allergic to the doctrines of grace, then you can still teach them to trust God's Word, rejoice in his grace, glory in Jesus, and obey the Great Commission. In time, this might lead some to embrace the grace of God in election, even if it takes three years or three decades. Or you may find steadfast recalcitrance that leads you to another place of ministry. Either way, love them by feeding them the Word of God, not a system of men.

### 3. Limit the Language of Calvinism, Not the Language of Scripture

#### *Candidating Pastor*

In this article, I've used the term Calvinist pastor and non-Calvinist church throughout. That said, my personal encouragement would be to avoid labels whenever possible. Because labels are so freighted with misunderstanding, it rarely helps to fly the banner of Calvinism unless you're willing to accept all the stereotypes that come with it. This is not to deny the value and need for confessionalism; it's to say that confessionalism depends on the chance to explain from Scripture the doctrines we confess.

Therefore, in your candidating be sure to know what the church's statement of faith is and how your own doctrinal convictions match up—or don't. If you're going to be the teaching pastor, you can demonstrate from the start how you handle the Bible, weigh doctrine (think: theological triage), and explain competing doctrines with gentleness and patience. While every church and every Calvinist pastor is different, be upfront about your beliefs, seek the counsel of trusted friends, and show how you would teach God's Word to the non-Calvinist church without overly technical theological verbiage.

#### *Current Pastor*

The same advice will serve the Calvinist pastor planted in a non-Calvinist church. While the Lord may allow you to lead the church to an understanding of the doctrines of grace, this should not be the measure of your success. Instead, pray for your people, teach them God's Word, preach the gospel, organize a prayer meeting, watch what God is doing, and invest in disciple-making. In my five years, I never attempted to implement the doctrines of grace—whatever that means—but I did introduce expositional preaching and helped the people spend more time in God's Word.

Calvinist pastor, you can have a fruitful ministry even if your people never embrace your theology. Various factors will determine how long you should stay in a church where hostility continues to mount against you and the doctrines you hold. But embrace the words of Paul to Timothy to “remain” where God has planted you (1 Tim. 1:3). Teach the Word of God to the people, and let their rejection of God’s Word—not your theological system—be the measuring rod for staying or going.

## **INTERCEDE WITHOUT CEASING, AND WAIT UPON THE LORD**

Whether you’re candidating or currently serving at a non-Calvinist church, the most important thing you can do is pray for the church.

### *Candidating Pastors*

If you’re candidating, then pray God makes the people teachable and yourself able to teach. The truth is, some qualified men simply aren’t well-suited to teach in certain places. While we should always begin with the elder qualifications of Timothy and Titus, there are other more subjective factors for receiving or rejecting a call.

Again, doctrinal statements are useful for discerning the kind of harmony a church and candidate must share. Still, wisdom should be applied when matching a pastor and church together. No church or pastor knows all they’re getting into when they begin, but in all circumstances prayer is vital for keeping our hearts humble and receptive for all that God intends in any ministry.

### *Current Pastors*

Current pastors should also give themselves to prayer—for their own hearts and for God to grow the church in the knowl-

edge of God. Calvinism teaches that knowledge of God is a gift of grace, and accordingly Calvinist pastors should be the most humble, gracious, and long-suffering of all God's servants. Similarly, our prayer should remind us that unless God opens eyes, the lost, and even the found, will remain in darkness until God grants understanding.

Accordingly, current pastors should pray for the light of God to illumine the Word. And they should pray for wisdom to make decisions, including how long they should remain. Inviting others to pray with them is vital in this spiritual battle, as is the need for like-minded friends to give counsel and assistance.

Ultimately, we hold to the doctrines of grace because we believe they're true to Scripture and best for the health of God's children. Still, it's up to God to reveal his truths to his people, and so we must intercede without ceasing for God to work.

## **PERSEVERE AND MAKE PLANS**

### *Candidating Pastor*

One of the most difficult times in an aspiring pastor's life is that season of waiting. As a result, it's tempting to "just take a position." Yet, if you trust in God's absolute sovereignty, then you can persevere in a holding pattern, trusting that God has good works planned for you (Eph. 2:10). Accordingly, my encouragement would be to persevere in a non-vocational role of service instead of prematurely or foolishly jumping into position of ministry that's not a good fit.<sup>25</sup>

That said, don't reject a call to non-Calvinist church because they don't affirm your favorite Reformed confession. There are many reasons for accepting such a call. At the same time, there are many unique challenges as well—for both the pastor and his family. Thus, receiving a call to non-Calvinist church should not

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.igniteus.net/archives/category/leadership>

be taken lightly, and plans should be made from the outset on how to best serve this congregation. Ideally, the more open you are about your theological convictions and the more committed you are to pastoral care, the better position you'll be in when doctrinal tensions arise.

Side-note: I've written this article out of my own experience in a church that didn't have a plurality of elders. Should you find a non-Calvinist church with a plurality of elders, there's a greater chance for theologically robust conversations before entering the role and/or understanding on how to go forward in handling current theological challenges.

### *Current Pastor*

Just the same, perseverance and planning are essential for serving faithfully in a non-Calvinist church. Even if you find that the church is ardently anti-Calvinistic and that staying long term is unlikely, the call to persevere is essential. Whatever God has for you and the church, your perseverance in the face of opposition is essential for the church and your future ministry. The church needs to see how a godly pastor endures suffering for the sake of truth—whether they receive your teaching or not. Perhaps your faithfulness under opposition will prepare the way for another pastor. But most certainly it will be a means of sanctifying you.

Because God designs all of life to mature his disciples, the faithful Calvinist pastor should see this difficult calling as a necessary part of his sanctification and growth. As Paul teaches us, God alone gives the growth in ministry (1 Cor. 3:7). But it seems like we all need to learn this lesson personally. For me, serving a non-Calvinist church did wonders to teach me about God's grace and sovereignty. Before pastoring this church, I held to many doctrines in theory. But after suffering through many cycles of accusation and opposition, they became heart-felt convictions and greater means of grace.

Truly, our Lord knows how to build his church. Amazingly, he's doing it with people of various theological beliefs. While not all doctrinal systems are equally biblical, we also know that we can't claim omniscience. Therefore, as pastors convinced of Calvinist doctrine we must be the most humble, patient, and gracious of all men. Our calling is not to bull-whip sheep into the deeper things of God. We're called to be humble shepherds who feed the flock and bring them to Jesus.

If that's your calling and your conviction, pastor, then you can do well in a Calvinist or non-Calvinist church. But regardless of where the Lord has put you today, remain faithful where you are, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, and love those whom God has given you—whether they're Calvinist, anti-Calvinist, or somewhere in between.

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# Preach the Bible, Not Calvinism



PJ Tibayan

“**A**re you a Calvinist?” asked the interim pastor who was guiding the pastoral search committee considering me. “If you’re a Calvinist, then this candidacy is over now.”

How would you answer that question? As a seven-point Calvinist I answered, “What do you mean by Calvinist?” He replied, “By Calvinist, I mean you only share the gospel with the elect and you don’t need to pray for people’s salvation because it’s already determined.” Based on that definition, I replied, “No, I am not a Calvinist.” Four months later, I was installed as their pastor.

Men desire the pastorate because they want to teach and equip the saints in sound doctrine (Eph 4:11–16). Pastors desire to train their members to disciple others to obey all of Christ’s commands (Matt 28:20). They teach the truth in order to take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Cor 10:3–5). Consequently, we pastors face a choice on whether to push our Calvinistic doctrine hard or hold back. Biblical and theological illiteracy burdens us. Our

hearers assume either personal free will independent of God's sovereignty or an overbearing exercise of God's will that obliterates human responsibility. Too many know nothing of human will compatible with God's unchanging decrees.

Will our people correctly connect the theological dots? What if they're steeped in Arminianism? More importantly, will they have the sturdy rock of God's wisdom, power, and goodness amid terrible suffering? Or will they be swept away by one of the incessant winds of false doctrine? Supposing they embrace Calvinism, what if they grow in pride regarding their theological knowledge? Pastors are tempted to worry about these dangers, and to grow impatient about the state of their people's theological understanding.

Personally, I've felt the pull to overreact impatiently and zealously by putting my people in their theological place. By grace, I've refrained from quick replies and asked clarifying questions instead. In seeking to wisely shepherd my church, many have been moved, without even knowing it, to a sound sense, conviction, and commitment regarding God's sovereign freedom.

But here's the question: how do we do this? At the risk of sounding too simple: preach the Bible, not Calvinism. Of course, if Calvinism is true, then as you preach the Bible you will preach Calvinism. My point is more specific: Do not aim to preach your system with its terminology. Aim to preach the Bible itself.

But, you might say, if Calvinism is true, then why shouldn't I preach it? Three reasons: the content, the function, and the goal of preaching.

## **1. BECAUSE OF THE CONTENT OF PREACHING.**

Preach the Bible instead of Calvinism because the Bible's words are God-breathed, not our theological formulations. Paul tells us "all Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim 3:16, cf. 2 Pet



1:21). The words written down in Scripture are God's words. Do we trust God's sovereign choice of words over our clever and even necessary theologizing about his sovereignty?

Charles Simeon serves as a good example of a preacher who aimed to be biblical. Though he believed in unconditional election he resolved "to endeavor to give to every portion of the word of God its full and proper force, without considering what scheme it favours, or whose system it is likely to advance" (*Charles Simeon: Pastor of a Generation*, Moule, Loc. 1066). If you're a Calvinist because it's biblical, then exult in and humble yourself before the Bible.

In considering the theological tension Calvinist preachers feel to nuance some biblical passages, Simeon wrote:

But the author [Simeon] would not wish one of them altered; he finds as much satisfaction in one class of passages as another; and employs the one, he believes, as freely as the other. Where the inspired Writers speak in unqualified terms, he thinks himself at liberty to do the same; judging that they needed no instruction from him how to propagate the truth. He is content to sit as a learner at the feet of the holy Apostles and has no ambition to teach them how they ought to have spoken. (Moule, Kindle Loc. 1062–1070)

Because the Bible's words are God's words, ground your members in those words. Trust your big God more than your articulation of big God theology. Explain and exult in the theology textually rooted and framed because the Bible's words are sufficient to shape Calvinistic thinking. For example, D. A. Carson comments on Acts 13:48,

After the detailed account of Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch, we are told that many Gentiles "honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (13:48). An excellent exercise is to discover all the ways Acts, or even the entire New Testament, speaks of conversion and of converts—and

then to use all of those locutions in our own speech. For our ways of talking about such matters both reflect and shape the way we think of such matters. There is no biblical passage that speaks of “accepting Jesus as your personal Savior” (though the notion itself is not entirely wrong). So why do many adopt this expression, and never speak in the terms of verse 48? (*For the Love of God*, vol. 1).

Let the Bible’s words “reflect and shape” the way our people think about salvation and sovereignty. After almost two years, I preached an overview sermon on Exodus about God’s supremacy. I read all every verse that spoke of (1) Pharaoh hardening his heart, (2) Pharaoh’s heart being hardened, and (3) God hardening his heart. Then I asked my self-professing anti-Calvinist church, “Who was ultimately responsible in Pharaoh’s heart being hardened, God or Pharaoh?” To my surprise, they all shouted back, “God!” They meant it. I thanked God that they embraced his ultimacy in hardening Pharaoh’s heart, regardless of what they did with the label “Calvinist.”

## **2. BECAUSE OF THE FUNCTION OF PREACHING.**

Preaching does more than impart information. It both models and fuels sound doctrine in the church.

Yes, preaching on Sundays imparts biblical information. But that’s not all. Expository preaching—that is, preaching in which the words and goal of the text control the words and goal of the sermon—teaches the church submit to and meditate on biblical texts. Expository preaching ought to be a preacher’s weekly example of joyful submission to the text. It also models how to meditate on Scripture as questions are posed and phrases are explained. Therefore, the preacher disciples his hearers to submit to and meditate on Scripture by his manner of preaching.

Preaching to the Sunday gathering is the fountainhead of pastoral ministry because you feed the whole church at one

time as they all sit together under the Word. But the fountain-head is not the whole fountain. Preaching fuels the church in sound doctrine beyond Sunday. The preached Word reverberates through the pastor's ministry *and* the church's discipling of one another.

There's more to pastoring than preaching. Pastors pray for the flock (Acts 6:4), teach in other contexts (Acts 20:20), oversee (Heb 13:17), equip (Eph 4:11), and model mature Christianity (1 Tim 3:1–7). God gives several other complementary ways and contexts to ground your people in sound doctrine: classes, meals, conversations, one-to-one Bible reading, Bible studies, small groups, etc. Preaching is not the whole of pastoral ministry any more than the Sunday gathering is the whole of the church's life together.

As the church shares life, they share Jesus and his words in their relationships. The local church and its relational web is the divinely designed matrix for discipleship and doctrinal maturity (Eph 4:11–16). Therefore, preach the Bible so they speak it to one another. Additionally, if your church has a confession of faith then ground them in those agreed-upon words. Strengthen their unity in the church's confession; prefer them over your Calvinistic labels. If you trust your Calvinism is biblical, then know it is not necessary to use those specific terms.<sup>26</sup>

During the pastoral search process for my church I refused to use the label "Calvinism" when specifically asked because they imported meaning unseen and unknown to me. Their "Calvinism" turned out to be Hyper-Calvinism. Instead, I gave them my understanding of how God's ultimate choice and our penultimate choices were compatible to which they agreed. I pointed to their statement of faith and told them I wholeheartedly affirmed what they confessed.

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<sup>26</sup> It must be said that systematic-theological terms are often be helpful in discipleship conversations and are even in some sense necessary, though they are rarely necessary in the Sunday pulpit ministry.

### **3. BECAUSE OF THE GOAL OF PREACHING.**

The goal of teaching and preaching is neither theological erudition nor the unashamed embrace of the label “Calvinism.” Instead, “the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5). Our goal is love: love for God, one another, and our neighbors (Mark 12:30–31, John 13:34–35). Why? Because in the obligatory pursuit of knowledge (2 Pet 3:18), Paul warns that “knowledge puffs up but love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1). And since God resists the puffed-up but gives grace to the humble, we pour ourselves out for our people’s growing experience of grace (1 Pet 5:5; James 4:6). God forbid that we contribute to God resisting our people as they grow in the theological pride that drips from our pulpits.

Two alternatives to doctrinally informed love are (1) sentimental intentions void of discernment, and (2) conceptual knowledge that never leads to acts of love. Fearing theological ignorance, we may overreact and make theological awareness the goal instead of the means. But theological awareness must not be pursued for its own sake, but for love’s sake.

Pastor, ground your members in the goal of God’s love in and through them by teaching them Scripture. Preach according to the function and goal of the Bible, and in doing so you will exemplify the divine love for your people that you pray to produce. In short, aim finally for biblically discerning love, not loveless theological articulation.

### **CONCLUSION**

Because of the content, function, and goal of preaching, I plead with you to preach the Bible, not Calvinism. Trust that your church’s confidence in the Scriptures is more vital for their souls than their submission to certain theological terminology.

Perhaps ask yourself: why are you passionate to teach Calvinism in the first place? Because Calvinism, biblically conceived, once humbled you and lit a flame of joy in your heart that you never wanted to go out. Amen! But I wonder: were you soundly convinced of Calvinism after reading systematic theology? Or were you led to joy from God's Word?

Brothers, if you resolve to preach the Bible instead of Calvinism you will immediately find relief to the burden of moving your people toward more nourishing theological waters. God's Word will do the work. Trust the Bible, not your or others' theological acumen.

Otherwise, you may impress your people with your theological precision to your glory. You may increase their theological tribalism. Or, you may increase their suspicion of your teaching and close them off to the glory of God's sovereign freedom in saving his people.

But if you preach the Bible explicitly with unwavering confidence in the text, then over time your people will learn God's Word. They'll trust it. You'll strengthen them for future suffering in ways not possible by twisting their arms to embrace Calvinism. God's Word will be honored as your church's true confidence. And you will shepherd them with God's peace and patience, reflecting our good Shepherd.

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# Real Calvinists Brag About Jesus, Not Calvinism



JA Medders

**T**he most important five-letter word in Calvinism isn't TULIP. It's Jesus. He has first place in everything (Colossians 1 v 18). The whole Bible is about him (John 5 v 39). The apostle Paul tells us again and again that our swagger must go and we are to boast only in the Lord. "So let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (2 Corinthians 10 v 17). If we are going to toot a horn, there's one note we have: "But as for me, I will never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6 v 14). Christ is our confidence. Christ is our cause. Christ is our song.

Let's brag about Jesus. Parents have no problems bragging on their kids: *Johnny did this at soccer... and you just won't believe what little Sally said the other day.* We brag about what we love.

You mind if I brag about the Lord for a minute? Join me.

Jesus literally holds the entire universe together, and yet he's never too busy for me. My Jesus walked on a Galilean sea, in the

middle of a raging storm, and acted like it was no big deal. And another time, he told the wind and the waves that enough was enough: “Be still!” I can’t even get my dog to sit.

In the town of Cana, a groom failed to bring enough wine for the wedding afterparty—a big embarrassing social no- no. Instead of running to the corner store, Jesus turned water into wine, showcasing his glory and his kindness for this failing newly-wed. Jesus helps failures. Jesus is there in crises.

Jesus is so kind to us that even when we are at our lowest, he still wants to keep us. Even when we wanted nothing to do with Jesus, he still wanted us. He still loved us. When I forget to ask Jesus for help, he still helps me.

The crowds mocked Jesus. So what? The Pharisees were always out to get him. No big deal. His family tried to get him to tone down his preaching. Fat chance. Jesus still hung out with the people that compromised his reputation. The people that society had kicked to the curb—Jesus went to them. He has a large heart for the outcasts, the misunderstood, the oddballs. He’s the Messiah of the misfits.

When I hear a noise in my backyard at two in the morning, I just hope it’s the neighborhood cat. Darkness and danger terrify me, but not Jesus. Our Lord went toe-to- toe with the demonic powers. Jesus stood up to these ancient bullies as they controlled and hurt men, women, and children. One command from Jesus and the demons scurried like roaches in the light.

Jesus encountered people with broken muscle tissue and misbehaving cellular structures, limbs, and organs. All fixed by the Carpenter of carpenters. The great Physician told a man with a shriveled and paralyzed hand to go ahead—stretch that arm out. Healed.

Jesus let Peter walk on water, contorting the sub-atomic properties of liquids and solids. And then he let Peter sink too, before enabling him to stand again. We’d all sink without Jesus.

Though fully God—not God junior, diet God, or bargain-basket God—Jesus really did let Roman soldiers nail iron spikes into his body. My Jesus did that for me. For my sins. Angels worship him, the universe depends on him, and he died for me.

Jesus became a cold corpse on a slab, but he refused to stay that way. He guaranteed he would rise from the dead and he did. His heart started pumping, his brainstem fired back on, and his central nervous system booted up. He lives. And he is alive in heaven, inviting us to go to him, to believe in him, to follow him, and to enjoy him.

When I'm unfaithful, he's faithful. When I'm clueless, he's patient. When I'm lost, he brings me back. When I'm confused, he's clarifying. When I'm forgetful, he's steady. Though there are times when I'm embarrassed to talk about him, he's not ashamed to call me his brother, friend, co-heir.

Every thought, inclination, and urge Jesus has is totally righteous—and we can't even begin to imagine that, because our thoughts, inclinations, and urges are so often totally not. In gym class, if Jesus had the first pick, he'd pick the kid who is always picked last, the kid we'd hope goes to the other team. We struggle to serve one another, grumbling as we get out of bed to make sure our spouse locked the front door; Jesus, however, with joy set before him, endured the cross to the point of death to save his Bride.

Jesus doesn't use an iron fist to lead us or intimidate us into following him. Jesus transforms us: he removes the blinders, and we see what the angels long to peer into.

Jesus is realistic about our abilities. We lose our keys and can't remember where we parked our car. There's no way we can manage our salvation. He keeps us. He's got us.

We could go on, but this Journal, even the world, can't contain all of the ways we could brag about our Lord (John 21 v 25). We need a kind of Calvinism that doesn't humblebrag about itself or about its footsoldiers, but loves to brag about the God of grace.



## **EDITOR'S NOTE**

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Real Calvinists Pray



JA Medders

“If God is totally sovereign, then why should I pray?”  
Maybe you’ve seen that grenade tossed your way while talking about the doctrines of grace. How do you respond? Hurl it back with something like, “We pray *because* God is sovereign.” Theologically, that’s right—but do you live it out? Would your prayers be as strong an argument for God’s sovereignty as your arguments?

When we understand Calvinism in our hearts, and not just our minds, we’ll find ourselves humbly drawing near the throne of grace in our times of need.

In John Calvin’s famous *Institutes*, he wrote more on prayer than he did on the extent of the atonement. Why? Because, as Kevin Vanhoozer said, “Unless we are praying to God, we are talking, as it were, behind his back.”<sup>27</sup> Real Calvinists talk, if you will, to God’s face, praising him, thanking him, and making requests—just like Jesus taught us.

## REAL CALVINISTS REMEMBER WHOSE DISCIPLE THEY ARE

Above any theological system, label, or tribe, we must be Christians first. Our allegiance and faith are squarely on the shoulders

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/08/letter-to-an-aspiring-theologian>

of the one who spread his shoulders on a splintery cross; the one who was wrapped in burial linens; the one who died, his shoulders on a stone slab, until he sat back up again, alive. The risen Lord of all tells us to pray, he taught us how to pray, and so we pray (Matthew 6:5–11).

Real Calvinists don't fall into the trap of faithless fatalism; "*Everything is determined, so it doesn't matter if we pray.*" We act out our faith in the sovereign Lord who ordains the ends, the means, and the methods. Our obedience in prayer—our requests and petitions—are all a part of his plan. I know we know this, but do we live accordingly?

Compare the attendance of your church's latest prayer meeting to the last men's and women's Bible study. Does your church even have a regular prayer meeting? Do you go? What's your Calvinism doing to you and your prayers?

Prayerless Calvinists are functional hyper-Calvinists. We may theologically deny the doctrines of hyper-Calvinism—that evangelism, missions, and prayer don't matter because God is sovereign—but if we're not praying, then our lives argue for it. Real Calvinists follow Jesus's commands. They pray confidently, frequently, and spur-of-the-moment-ly because God is in control and he loves to hear from his children while he sits on his throne. Or, in other words, they "pray constantly" (1 Thessalonians 5:17, CSB).

## **REAL CALVINISTS PRAY FOR GOD TO SAVE SINNERS**

Real Calvinists pray for the work of the gospel in their city, their family, their office, their church plants, and among unreached people groups. Irresistible grace—that is, God drawing sinners to himself by his unrivaled gravitational glory in the gospel—doesn't stifle prayers for God to save others. It should ignite us and accelerate our excitement.

The triune God is the only one who grants faith and repentance. So we plead with God to remove the veil (2 Corinthians 3:18), to remove the scales (Acts 9:18), and to draw sinners to himself (John 6:44). Irresistible grace is more than a talking point against pragmatic, seeker-driven Churchianity. We ought to connect it to our prayers to see sinners made new by a sovereign God.

Calvinists should be revival-ready people. We should please with God to save; we should knock until he answers.

### **REAL CALVINISTS PRAY FOR THE LOCAL AND GLOBAL CHURCH**

At the cross, as Jesus' blood poured out and mixed with Golgotha's soil, Jesus purchased a particular people for himself. This people, the church, is from all around the world (Acts 20:28). And Jesus wants it to flourish (Revelation 2–3).

The members of your church, the ones with whom you chit-chat and eat the Lord's Supper, are precious to Jesus. He calls us to love one another like he loved us (John 13:34). The church, no matter how dysfunctional she can be, is precious to Jesus and should be to us as well. In John 17, Jesus prays for the unity, flourishing, and mission of the church. If you believe in particular redemption, then you must have a particular affection for your church. So pray for her elders, deacons, and leaders. Pray for her health and continued faithfulness.

And let's not forget: the persecuted church is your church, too. The brothers and sisters of Christ in China, whose government is trying to run them out, are fellow members of the body of Christ. The definite atonement of Christ brings us together. So we should pray not only for the church we see on Sundays but for those we can't see—persecuted believers around the world. We pray for all churches, even those who don't enjoy tulips, because Christ, not Calvinism, is what makes us the church.

## REAL CALVINISTS PRAY FOR HELP IN THE PURSUIT OF HOLINESS

Total depravity reminds us we are totally dependent on Christ. “I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me” (John 15:5, CSB). We can’t do anything without Jesus. Any fruit from our lives grows via our union with him. Our growth *in* Christ comes *from* Christ. But far too often, we forget this.

Real Calvinists realize we must depend on the one who refused to stay dead. Every day, we depend on the righteousness of the righteous one. Jesus is the only one who wasn’t born depraved—and he is the one who took our depravity at the cross so we could become holy as he is holy, so we could bear fruit with him as we’re transformed into his image.

If you’re battling a specific sin, ask Jesus for help. Do you want to kill that flit of anger you get toward you-know-who? Then look to Jesus. Don’t simply remind yourself of the truth (“I know Jesus can help me”), act on it. Kneel by your bed, get prostrate on the floor, or scribble in your notebook: “Jesus, I need your help. I can’t grow in holiness without you. Help me work out my salvation because I know you are at work in me.” Christlikeness only comes from Christ.

Calvinism doesn’t render our prayers meaningless. On the contrary, it ought to revive and even sustain our prayer life. As Calvin said, “To taste of God’s mercy opens to us the door of prayer.” Real Calvinism reminds us that while we are sinners, we are saints, and we can—we must!—cry out, “Abba! Father!” Because he is sovereign after all.

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# Teach, Wait, Repeat: How Calvinism Fuels My Commitment to Congregationalism



Sam Emadi

**P**astor Mike was discouraged. He'd been working hard at revitalizing a church for two years. Yet, despite his best efforts, the church was still characterized by immaturity. He had seen a few conversions, a few marriages repaired, and a few folks begin to take an interest in discipleship, but most of the members were lukewarm at best.

An important vote was coming up at the next members meeting, but Mike was sure it wouldn't go well. Slumped in his chair, he looked at his associate pastor. "This church hasn't been properly taught in decades," he lamented, "it's times like this I think that maybe I convince myself that congregationalism isn't biblical!"

I can empathize with Pastor Mike's lament. Christ's sheep can act in immature, even ungodly ways—particularly those in

churches that have suffered through years of theological malnourishment. Sometimes, pastors can feel helpless as they watch the congregation wield the keys of the kingdom unwisely or even unjustly. It seems like ministry would be a good deal easier if we just changed our polity. Why give the congregation the final authority on matters of membership, discipline, and doctrine when it seems like pastors could do that work much more effectively?

But if we're convinced that Scripture teaches congregationalism, how do we stay the course especially when that polity often seems counterproductive, at least in the short-term, to the church's best interests? In this article, I want to show how the doctrines of grace undergird and fuel a commitment to both congregationalism and a philosophy of ministry characterized by preaching, praying, loving, and discipling the congregation to maturity. I'm not saying that congregationalism only works with a Calvinist soteriology. I'm simply saying that congregationalist pastors who affirm God's sovereignty should feel confident that his grace can transform even the most immature congregation into a holy and vibrant community that wields the keys of the kingdom wisely and righteously.

In what follows, then, we'll consider how our theology shapes our polity, how polity shapes ministry, and how ministry is fueled by our conception of God.

## **THEOLOGY SHAPES POLITY: REHEARSING THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF CONGREGATIONAL POLITY**

Congregationalism is theologically rooted in the fact that, in the new covenant era, all of God's people have the law written on their heart. Yes, New Testament texts explicitly affirm congregational polity (Matthew 18; 1 Cor 5). This polity, however, doesn't emerge out of a vacuum. The arrival of the new covenant fundamentally transforms the people of God from a "mixed" community (one

designed for believers and unbelievers) to a “believing” community (one designed for everyone who “knows the Lord, from the least to the greatest” (Jer 31:34).

This shift from a mixed community to a regenerate one was predicted in the Old Testament. In the old covenant, the people of Israel were in need of a circumcised heart (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4). Certainly, some Israelites were genuinely regenerated and justified by faith (Gen 15:6; Ps 32). Yet most members of the covenant community were faithless, unregenerate, and “circumcised merely in the flesh” (Jer 9:25–26).

In the new covenant, however, every covenant member has received heart circumcision (Deut 30:1–7). In other words, each new covenant member has received God’s saving grace. God has removed their former heart of stone and given them a heart of flesh (Ezek 36:26), one inscribed with the law of God (Jer 31:33). Further, God puts his Spirit in each member of the new covenant, enabling them to walk in obedience to the law (Ezek 36:27). These texts (and many others) clearly accent God’s sovereign act in salvation and emphasize that these salvific blessings are enjoyed by all in the new covenant.

Congregationalism, then, is a function of this new redemptive-historical reality that each member of the new covenant has been regenerated by God and indwelt with his Spirit. Congregationalism *works* only because the people themselves are objects of God’s sovereign grace—transformed sinners who can now genuinely respond to God’s Word and yield their lives in submission to God’s will. In other words, these new covenant texts highlight God’s effectual work in the life of each covenant member. There is a natural fit between God’s transforming work as articulated by Calvinists and the way God has determined his people govern themselves in the new covenant.



## POLITY SHAPES MINISTRY: PASTORING AND CONGREGATIONALISM

As Jonathan Leeman has argued, polity shapes discipleship.<sup>28</sup> How we view the nature of the church shapes how we approach the Christian life. Similarly, polity shapes pastoring. How we understand the pastoral task is largely a function of where we locate the keys of the kingdom. Pastors who see themselves as having final earthly authority on matters of membership, discipline, and doctrine can more easily tolerate immaturity and doctrinal aberration in the congregation. Why? Because those immaturities likely won't threaten the overall trajectory of the church.

But congregationalists recognize the keys are not in the hands of the elders but in the hands of the local church—the particular assembly of justified sinners. This in turn shapes pastoral efforts and philosophy of leadership. Pastors do not make right decisions for the church, they teach the church to make right decisions for itself. Leeman even calls elder-led congregationalism Jesus' discipleship program. They do not (nor can they) care for the whole congregation, so they must equip members to care for one another. Pastors are not necessarily the front line of ministry but the supply line—equipping the saints to carry out the church's mission.

In other words, congregationalism creates a membership-focused ministry. The pastoral responsibility is not to build programs, raise funds, or even start new ministry initiatives. Instead, pastors focus on shepherding and discipling the congregation through preaching and teaching, all while asking God to produce fruit from their labors. They also focus on raising up elders to share the pastoral burden of discipling members to wield the keys of the kingdom well.

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<sup>28</sup> See Leeman's edifying discussion on this point in Jonathan Leeman, "Introduction—Why Polity?," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, eds. (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 11–20.

Scripturally, Paul articulates this commitment in Ephesians 4:12, describing the pastoral task as “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry.” The picture here is not of the pastors building up the church but of the pastors training the church such that it “builds itself up” (v. 16) by being a congregation mature enough to reject false doctrine (v. 14) and apply the truth of God’s word to others in a transformative way (v. 15).

Modern pastoral manuals and “how-tos” emphasize the need for ministerial creativity and entrepreneurialism. The supposedly “good” pastor is the one gifted as a manager of ministry initiatives—the more CEO-like, the better. But the biblical picture is far simpler: godly men, recognized as elders by a congregation, teach others what the Bible means and how they should obey it. Then they pray that God would cause the people to obey and encourage others in the congregation to do the same.

### **MINISTRY UNDER THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD: CONGREGATIONALISM AND CALVINISM**

Continuing in congregationalism is hard work precisely because it requires us to *trust* God’s work in and among our people. Pastors often know how to wield the keys of the kingdom better than the congregation, but we must trust God’s wisdom in putting the keys into *their* hands, and then plead with the Lord that he cause our people to wield the keys rightly. We can teach, shepherd, counsel, and disciple, but God alone can bring spiritual maturity.

Calvinist pastors, of all people, should be the most patient people on the planet. We should recognize that while we plant and water, only God can give true growth (1 Cor 3:6–7). We can’t engineer results or produce spiritual life—only God can. Our job is to plod, teaching God’s Word to the congregation and trusting his Spirit to work, even though he sometimes works more slowly than we might prefer.

Paul commends this model of ministry in 2 Timothy 4:2: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” Pastors, therefore, must give themselves to the task of teaching—“preach the word,” “reprove,” “rebuke,” “exhort”—with a disposition of “complete patience.” Paul’s command to exercise patience shows just how truly dependent we are on God’s sovereignty to produce spiritual fruit in our people.

Pastoring a congregational church looks like diligent labor, constant teaching, and tireless shepherding. It also looks a lot like waiting—waiting for God to bless the ministry of his Word. Ministries built on attractionalism or that diminish congregational activity and authority with overstaffing are not characterized by waiting but restlessness. But biblical ministry, relying on God’s sovereign grace, gladly submits to God’s timing and purpose. We trust God to produce spiritual fruit at the time he desires to the degree he wills.

Yes, congregations can be recalcitrant. Christ’s sheep sometimes bite other sheep and their shepherds. But remembering that God’s sovereign grace is the bedrock of the new covenant community will steady our commitments to congregationalism and keep us constant in the work of teaching, discipling, and praying. We labor in hope that our congregation can govern itself wisely under elder leadership precisely because we are confident that he who began a good work in them will carry it to completion (Phil 1:6). The same Spirit that formed our local congregation into a new covenant community is the same Spirit now sanctifying the people.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# You're So Depraved, You Probably Think This Church Is About You: How Total Depravity Uponds Attractionalism



Alex Duke

**T**he last time I wept during a church service I wasn't even there. I was watching online.

One Sunday night while scrolling through Facebook, I stumbled across an invitation to a church's live-stream. I'd often wondered, *Hm, what do they do on Sundays?* And so, sufficiently curious, I clicked and tuned in.

Thirty minutes later, I sat on my couch, weeping.

If this were a movie, the director would insert a *\*record-scratch\** at this moment, and the protagonist would look into the camera and say something like, *I bet you're wondering how I got here.*

Well, let me explain.

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This particular Sunday was Father's Day, and a father-and-son duo preached a big-hearted sermon that exhorted dads to a higher standard.

As the service concluded, the church sought to honor several dads in the congregation who had witnessed the Lord redeem irredeemable situations. To do this, they ushered a train of families across the stage. Once they arrived center-stage, each member stopped and stared into the camera as one person—sometimes a child, sometimes a father—held up a poster-board that briefly described the background of brokenness: *I was asleep at the wheel as a dad; our dad grew up in a home of abuse and divorce; I never had a spiritual conversation with my dad.*

For a few lingering seconds, everyone's eyes were riveted to the camera. Then, at precisely the right moment, the poster-board would flip around and the brokenness would yield to wholeness: *I finally woke up and was baptized a few years ago; by adopting us through foster care, God has shown our dad how to be a father to the fatherless; I finally called to talk to my dad about Jesus...when he died a few months later, I know he went to heaven.*

Story after story after story, this string of saints retold triumphs of God's grace. I thought of David's words in Psalm 30:

*You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;  
you have loosed my sackcloth  
and clothed me with gladness,  
that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent.  
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever!*

And so I sat there—on my couch, watching the service on Facebook—and I was weeping.

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We'll return to this in a bit, but I mention it now as an example of what I want this piece to address: how total depravity ought to focus our philosophy of ministry; how it ought to upend the guiding tenets of attractionalism; and how it ought to confound the well-meaning practices of attractional churches.

That's the roadmap. Let's get going.

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## **1. A BELIEF IN TOTAL DEPRAVITY OUGHT TO FOCUS OUR PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY.**

I suppose I should be clear about what I mean by “total depravity.” Simply put, total depravity refers to the natural, post-Fall state of all humanity, in particular our innate inability to save ourselves. Apart from God's supernatural and regenerating work of grace, we're all spiritually dead God-haters—curved in on ourselves and insatiably satisfied with sin (Eph. 2:3–5).

This depravity is “total” *not* insofar as we are as bad as we can be, but insofar as our badness is all-encompassing. Adolf Hitler sinned both more often and more egregiously than Mother Teresa, but he was not more spiritually dead—and *she* was not in any *less* need of God's resurrecting grace.

Put still more simply, total depravity means:

1. We cannot save ourselves because we're dead in sin.
2. We don't want to save ourselves because we love our sin.
3. We will be held responsible for this.

Unbelievers' most essential problem is not that they're ignorant, apathetic, or rudderless, but that they've personally, willfully, and

happily rebelled against the God who made them. Their most inexorable enemy is not intellectual finitude or the ennui of life in the modern world, but what stares back at them in the mirror as they wordlessly brush their teeth. If this is true—and the Scriptures say that it is—then what unbelievers must concern themselves with is nothing less than escaping the just judgment of God.

*These truths* ought to focus every church's philosophy of ministry. How so? Well, most prominently, *such a church would talk clearly and regularly about man's sin and God's wrath.*

I've heard some pastors talk about sin as if it's little more than the emotionally unhealthy labels we give ourselves: broken, unlovable, hopeless, etc. While these labels articulate some of the alienating *effects* of sin, they obscure its essence and undermine a person's agency and culpability before the Lord. It's the language of pop psychology more than biblical anthropology.

Of course, sin is something done *to* us—sadly, some have much more experience with this than others. But if we stop there, we've evacuated the Bible's teaching on the topic. Why? Because no one disagrees with this. Blame-shifting and finger-pointing come so easily to us. It's our natural, post-Fall state: "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

It doesn't require a work of God to convince someone they're a victim of others' sin. It also doesn't require a work of God to convince someone they've been materially affected by others' sin. But it's quite difficult, certainly so apart from God's grace, to convince someone that they themselves are a high-handed perpetrator of sin against both God and others.

So, churches should speak about sin *primarily* (though not exclusively) as our personal and willful rebellion against God, and not as a social and indirect label given to us by others or ourselves. They should be clear that Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for sinners, not as a rudder for the rudderless (Rom. 3:25; 1 Jn. 2:2, 4:10).

I don't mean to deny the comprehensive nature of Christ's work—he does indeed restore the broken, love the unlovely, and give hope to the hopeless; yes, and amen!—but precisely none of that is accessible apart from Christ absorbing God's wrath for sinners.

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## **2. A BELIEF IN TOTAL DEPRAVITY OUGHT TO UPEND THE TENETS OF ATTRACTIVEALISM.**

Again, it would be helpful to define our terms, especially since I've somewhat tipped my hand by attaching the spooky suffix “-ism” to the relatively nonthreatening adjective “attractional.” What are the “tenets” of this so-called ideology?

A few come to mind:

- Churches committed to attractionalism tend to not push people away. The goal is to keep the fence around the church low, to keep the door to the church open and unlocked, so that all people can come in to enjoy the fellowship of the church without the requirements of membership.
- Churches committed to attractionalism seek to curry favor among outsiders by highlighting how *similar* their members are to the world, whereas the Bible ties the church's attractiveness to its distinctness from the world (Mt. 5:16, 1 Pet. 2:12). This commitment to similarity is why so much modern worship music resembles a run-of-the-mill arena show. It's why so many churches do sermon series on movies or parenting or marriage or money management—such interests are universal. It's why a cottage industry of programs often flourish in attractional churches, turning them into a kind a religious service provider, built to meet certain needs of prospective members in the surrounding commu-



nity. Such programs—food pantries, recovery groups for addicts, small groups for divorcees, ESL classes—are certainly not “bad” in a vacuum, but when tethered to an attractional philosophy of ministry that sloppifies the line between the church and the world, they obscure the primary purpose of the church and in the process tend to do more spiritual harm than material good.

- Churches committed to attractionalism feature preaching that tends to focus on the *benefits* of the gospel—happiness, improved marriages and parenting, a clean conscience, peace of mind, etc.—at the expense of clear teaching on the gospel itself. If you go to a church for a month, and you never once hear the pastor talk about sin, the wrath of God, and Christ’s substitutionary death, then you’re likely sitting in a church swayed by the commitments of attractionalism. If you hear the pastor call people to “trust in Jesus” but never to “repent of sin,” then you’re likely sitting in a church swayed by the tenets of attractionalism.

Attractionalism is bad. Attracting unbelievers is good.

Every church should want to attract unbelievers. In fact, 1 Corinthians 11–14 *assumes* their presence in our gatherings. Every time a church gathers, unbelievers should not only be welcomed but directly addressed; it should be a “safe place” for them, where their lifestyles will be challenged, not disrespected, where they’ll face confrontation, not prejudice.

Every church should desire to be *attractive* to the unsaved. We seek to be attractive by planning our gatherings with a concern for clarity and intelligibility (1 Cor. 11–14). We seek to be attractive by preaching sermons that offer connections to their worldview (Acts 17). We seek to be attractive by being hospitable (Heb. 13:2) and meeting needs (Matt. 25:35). We seek to be attractive by being men of sincerity, commissioned by God to speak of Christ

with confidence that the knowledge of him will be a fragrance of life to some, and death to others (2 Cor. 2:14–17).

But *attractionalism* takes these fairly obvious and benign desires and turns them into the *raison d'être* of the local church. *Attractionalism* shrinks the commands of Scripture. *Attractionalism* inverts the Great Commission, turning it into a command to get people to come to *us*—and then lops off the parts that require patience and longsuffering. *Attractionalism* indulgently prioritizes one biblical command—evangelism—at the expense of other commands—meaningful church membership and discipline.

But how is it that total depravity upends these tenets of attractionalism? Simply put, because “no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:11). Again, man’s biggest problem isn’t boredom, but rebellion; it isn’t their family’s relational strife, but their own spiritual tyranny; it isn’t financial mismanagement, but spiritual bankruptcy; it isn’t their addiction to drugs, but their abnegation of God.

*Attractionalism* buries the lede. To be sure, it does so with the best of intentions, under a calendar full of kindness. But a pastor swept away by its assumptions is like a doctor who approaches an open-heart surgery with a plastic spork. No matter how well trained he’s been, no matter how deeply he wants this person’s suffering to end, his tools and strategies simply aren’t good enough to fix the problem.

### **3. A BELIEF IN TOTAL DEPRAVITY OUGHT TO CONFOUND THE WELL-MEANING PRACTICES OF ATTRACTIVE CHURCHES.**

Do you remember that time I cried watching church online? Well, what made me cry is an example of what I’m referring to when I say “the well-meaning practice of attractive churches.” The moment was moving; it crescendoed perfectly with

the theme of the sermon, using flesh-and-blood illustrations to drive the point home.

As each family crossed the stage, it was as if the preacher said, *See! It can be done! See! It can be done. See! It can be done.*

Now, I hesitate to be a naysayer about publicly and even ritously celebrating the work of God in the lives of his people. But—if I may, for just a moment—I realized upon reflection that what made me cry could have made *anybody* cry, whether Jew or Greek, male or female, Democrat or Republican, God-hater or God-lover, Christian or Sikh or secular humanist.

You see, in the sermon that set up this moment, I'd heard a lot of stuff. I'd heard, *Be a good dad because dads are vital for the spiritual health of their kids.* I'd heard, *God is powerful and you need him to help you be a good dad.* I'd heard, *No situation is beyond redemption.* Yes, and amen; yes, and amen; yes, and amen.

But do you know what I didn't hear? I didn't hear that my own failure as a dad and my own failure as a son is proof-positive of my own sinfulness, for which I will one day be judged by God, the Creator of all things. I didn't hear that this Creator who owns my life and to whom I am accountable is *also* a Father, one who has in love and before the foundation of the world predestined a people for adoption as sons through his Son, Jesus Christ. I didn't hear that through this Son's blood, sons of disobedience could become sons of inheritance, and children of wrath could become children of promise—because of love and by grace, so that no one may boast. I didn't hear that the best is yet to come for these newly adopted sons, that their Father's inheritance in all of its riches and kindness await them in glory, kept safe for them under their older Brother's watchful eye.

In short, I didn't hear the gospel.

I realized that what I'd seen had been engineered, like a midday infomercial's before-and-after photo, to depict life change without an entirely straightforward explanation for *how* it happened. It was impressive, even moving, but it was gospel-less.

I want to be clear about what I'm *not* saying: I'm not saying these particular families and their stories are gospel-less. I trust every single one of them would attribute every shred of grace in their lives to the loving-kindness of God their Father and their Lord Jesus Christ. I trust every single one of these fathers loves Jesus and knows the gospel. But in this particular church service, these otherwise "real" stories became, in a sense, un-real. At the risk of speaking crassly, let me explain what I mean: these stories became a product, placed in a particular time and place and date to prove a concept, the one just articulated by the preachers on the stage.

Stories of God's grace changing people's lives are beautiful. They attractively advertise to the world, and they motivate Christians to joy and obedience. For example, at my church, before someone gets baptized they stand center-stage and read their testimony—not unlike what happened at this Father's Day gathering. But this is always done in connection to a crystal-clear and extended articulation of the gospel—both in the sermon and the testimonies themselves—so that there is no confusion.

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What I fear happened on this particular Father's Day, and what I fear happens in attractional churches across the globe every Sunday, is that people sit in these services and respond precisely the ways these churches are praying for them respond. What I fear is that people cry—or laugh, or manage their money better, or stop drinking, or stop yelling at their wives—for insufficient reasons and with insufficient motivations because they have an insufficient understanding of who Jesus is and what the Christian life is.

Generally speaking, totally depraved people want to be better parents. They want to be better *people*. They want to manage their money better and stop drinking and stop looking at pornography and feel less hate in their heart toward their estranged sibling and

work out 3–5 times a week and rise up the food-chain at work through their industry and integrity.

And so sermons about these things, or about other generic benefits of following Christ, will “work.” They’ll make a dent. But like a thumb on a thousand-dollar mattress, you’ll see it and then it’s gone.

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I realize I’ve spent over 2500 words now to make a simple point: because total depravity is real, the attractional—some might call it “seeker-sensitive” or “pragmatic”—model of church simply doesn’t work. It’s weighed down by good intentions, and its “success” in producing converts—both genuine and apparent—should not let us ignore the scourge of people that it leaves unsaved yet self-deceived, relaxed yet unregenerate.

It’s like putting a magnet in a jar full of gummy bears. It’s like raising your voice while talking to someone who doesn’t speak your language. Again, it simply doesn’t work.

Humanity’s problem is too great to be solved by relatable sermons and niche programs for broken people. And God’s solution is too great to exhaust itself with redeemed families and balanced budgets.

So, what do we do? We trust the means God has promised to bless in his Word, which is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

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# How Unconditional Election Sustains Pastoral Ministry



Jeramie Rinne

**B**y God's grace, I've served as a pastor now for over two decades. Occasionally, younger pastors ask me how to achieve longevity and success in pastoral ministry. I often respond, "Be a Calvinist."

I'm joking of course.

Sort of.

Yes, I know there are fruitful, Bible-believing, gospel-preaching, non-Calvinist pastors. I count such men as brothers and celebrate their labors.

Yet for me, the theological framework commonly called "Calvinism," and the doctrine of unconditional election in particular, has profoundly shaped my understanding of success in ministry and sustained me through the toil of shepherding. It's been a key to my own ministerial survival.

## DEFINING THE DOCTRINE

Why is unconditional election so beneficial to day-in, day-out church labor? To answer that, we should first define it.

Unconditional election means at least these two things:

- 1) that before creation God elected, or chose, or predestined, certain people to be saved, and
- 2) that his choice to save certain people was based solely on his sovereign, good pleasure and not based on any condition external to himself.

Hence the term “unconditional.” God doesn’t predestine someone contingent upon the condition that he foreknows they will one day believe the gospel. Just the opposite: people believe the gospel because God has first freely chosen them. God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy. He is sovereign in salvation.

I won’t take the time to make the biblical argument for unconditional election here. The doctrine has many able defenders. In my own theological journey, I found Jesus’ words in John 6 as well as Paul’s teachings in Ephesians 1 and Romans 9 to be particularly decisive. Nor will I delve into the philosophical challenges this doctrine raises.

Instead, I want to address another pressing question: So what?

## DEFINING SUCCESS

What difference does such a fine theological distinction make for the pastor in the trenches of ministry? When was the last time your opinion about the nature of election determined what you said at a hospital bedside, or how you structured an elders meeting agenda, or what closing hymn you picked?

The practical implications of unconditional election don’t immediately jump out at us. But when we see God’s will as deci-

sive in salvation, it should fundamentally re-frame how we think about the task of pastoral ministry. In short, unconditional election means that our job as pastors is primarily to be *faithful*.

Yes, God determines the outcomes of ministry according to his own purposes. He will save and sanctify his chosen people. But this is key: God does his saving and sanctifying through his Word and gospel as it is proclaimed and taught and obeyed by us. Consider Paul: “Faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). God has ordained both the ends (the salvation of the elect) and the means (his Word).

So we pastors do have a part to play; we don’t sit idly by in the name of predestination. No, we do the proclaiming, the teaching, and the obeying, and then God accomplishes his purposes in his time. In a ministry built on unconditional election, success is measured by faithfulness to the divinely appointed means rather than by numbers of conversions or church attendance.

## **SUSTAINABLE SHEPHERDING**

Seeing success as faithfulness in light of God’s unconditional election lifts a great burden from our shoulders as shepherds. God merely wants us to do our part and trust him for the rest. Knowing this can carry our shepherding for the long haul, especially when we don’t see the results we’ve been praying and laboring toward.

Consider how this might look like in four different areas of ministry:

### *Evangelism*

If God has sovereignly chosen to save some and to do so through the proclamation of the gospel, then our goal in evangelism is to speak the gospel clearly, and to live in a way that lends credibility to that gospel. Whether people believe or not is out of



our hands. We're in the proclaiming business, not the converting business. God will grant saving faith as he has planned, like when Paul preached to the Gentiles in Antioch and "as many as were appointed to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48)—or when he preached to Lydia in Philippi and "the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14).

If someone rejects the gospel, you need not feel like an evangelistic failure, or fret that if you had just used a different illustration, or made a better argument, or smiled more, then you could have nudged the person across the goal line of belief. Don't ask "Was I convincing?" Instead, ask "Was the gospel accurate?" The first question is exhausting, but the second question seems attainable. And even when someone rejects Jesus in the moment, they might still be elect and come to believe later. This possibility should inspire us to keep speaking the gospel as God gives opportunity, even to those who seem most closed to it. Always remember: faithfulness is success.

### *Preaching*

The congregation sitting before you is usually a mixed bag: old, young, single, married, non-Christian, newly Christian, nominally Christians, and maturely Christian. How can you reach them all for Jesus with one sermon? Will you do a topical message that targets the felt needs of a different portion of your audience each week? Will engineer your church's ethos to target a specific demographic? Or why not try to touch everyone with a sermon series built around summer movie titles since, you know, everyone loves movies. You could even show movie clips as sermon illustrations!

But if God has unconditionally chosen to save and sanctify whom he will through his Word, then our task in preaching is first and foremost to communicate the Bible clearly and accurately. When we make the main point of the text to be the main point

of the sermon and then apply that main point to the church, we have succeeded. Like the farmer, we can sleep soundly knowing that “the seed sprouts and grows; he does not know how” (Mark 4:27). We preachers don’t have to be an experts at cultural analysis or trend-spotting or video editing or storytelling or apologetics. Just be a preacher who explains and applies the Bible as faithfully and clearly as you can week after week, and trust that the Word will work among the elect in God’s time.

Furthermore, we can preach from any part of the Bible and have confidence that the Lord can get the job done since “all Scripture is God breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). God can work among his predestined people through Leviticus just as well as John. That’s liberating and provides us with a lifetime library of effective preaching material.

### *Counseling*

I find counseling to be one of the hardest parts of pastoral work. People and their problems are so complex. How do we persuade them to think and act correctly when they’re facing giant issues like addiction, marital conflict, abuse, or grief?

When we aim for faithfulness, success looks like providing compassionate, biblical counsel and leaving the soul-healing to God, knowing for sure “that he who began a good work in you will bring it on to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). We can make it our goal to learn how the gospel applies to life and how to share those insights pastorally.

Most pastors know that in counseling one should keep healthy boundaries and avoid a savior complex. Somehow, they have to go home at night and not carry a sense of ultimate responsibility for all those heart-breaking situations. A robust belief in unconditional predestination gives a theological foundation for laboring and then letting go, which in turn enables longevity.

## *Suffering*

Suffering is one of those things they often don't prepare pastors for in seminary. And yet, it's a universal experience for pastors. As Paul exhorted Timothy, "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:3).

Suffering can come in the form of external persecution. It can also come from within the church: betrayal, disappointment, apostasy, slander and gossip, emotionally draining cases, unrealistic expectations, complaints and criticisms, crises, and loneliness. In addition, we bear that ever-present sense that there's more to do. As Paul said, "There is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28). I don't know how Paul bore the responsibility of all those congregations. I can barely handle one church. We pastors try to look competent, but we're often confused, exhausted, and scared.

Thank God the fate of his church doesn't hinge upon us. He merely calls us to be faithful, even in trials. Especially in trials. As Paul said, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the Word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (2 Timothy 2:8–10).

Did you catch that? Paul endured suffering *for the sake of the elect*. It's precisely because God has an elect people, and because God's Word is unhindered and effective, that we can endure tribulation. God uses our faithful suffering for the gospel to bring his chosen children home.

## **MISSION IMPOSSIBLE**

Again, these ideas aren't just theological theory for me. They're fundamental to my sustainability plan. I currently pastor a large

multinational church in the Middle East. There are scores of cultures in the congregation, as well as unreached peoples all around us. If God's work rests on my ability to decode all the different cultures and be persuasive and relevant to each one, and on top of that to break through to the unreached, then I'm sunk. What's relevant to one society can be repulsive to another.

But unconditional election gives me hope. Jesus said, "All that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37). All the elect will come. And they will come because Jesus himself calls them through his word: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me" (John 10:26). My part as a pastor is to consistently proclaim the gospel and the Bible and trust that Jesus will do the summoning and the feeding.

And you know what? This works. When you ask our church members what draws them to this congregation, you'll hear one particular answer over and over. They're here because of the centrality of the Bible and the gospel. The gospel holds this hyper-diverse flock together like a supernatural chemical bond.

And so my mission, and yours, is clear: faithfully preach the Word, counsel with the Word, sing the Word, pray the Word, and obey the Word. "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:1–12).

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Definite Atonement and Church Membership



Stephen Wellum

**W**hat does definite atonement have to do with church membership? Many people would say, “Nothing.” However, I disagree and will outline my argument in two steps. First, I will sketch the priestly argument for definite atonement. Second, I will argue that the implications of this argument entail a regenerate view of the church.

## I. THE PRIESTLY ARGUMENT FOR DEFINITE ATONEMENT

Definite atonement must be argued on multiple fronts; it is not demonstrated by one text alone but a whole set of texts and inter-related issues, both exegetical and theological. One crucial issue central to the discussion is the nature of Christ’s priestly work. Most affirm that our Lord’s work is priestly. Yet many who affirm this truth deny that Christ’s sacrifice entails a definite atonement.

What is the argument for the definite nature of his priestly work? It's this: Jesus, as the high priest of the new covenant, willingly offered himself as our substitute in obedience to his Father's will. Christ's intent was not only to achieve the redemption of the elect but also to secure everything necessary to bring the elect to the end for which his death was designed, namely, our justification and all the blessings of the new covenant, including the gift of the Spirit who effectively applies Christ's work to those for whom he died. Also, due to Christ's resurrection and ascension, our Lord now rules at the Father's right hand and intercedes for the elect, thus guaranteeing our eternal salvation.

On the other hand, non-definite atonement views must divide Christ's unified priestly work, re-define Christ's relation as priest to his people, and ultimately make ineffective his work as the head of the new covenant—all points which Scripture will not allow.

The priestly argument for definite atonement is not new. Yet the argument is rarely dealt with by its critics, or if it is discussed, only aspects of it are addressed, aspects that are usually divorced from their full biblical presentation. I will briefly unpack this argument by first discussing how OT priests carried out a definite and unified work, and second, by discussing how our Lord's work as the new covenant mediator achieves a definite and more effective work for his covenant people.

First, let us think about OT priests. Hebrews 5:1 is a nice summary of the work of the OT high priest: "For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins." Every OT high priest was *selected* from among the people (specifically the tribe of Levi) and was in solidarity with those he represented. The high priest's appointment was for the purpose of *representing* a *specific* people before God, namely, all those under the old covenant. Never did the priest represent and mediate for a people other than God's covenant people; he never functioned as a universal

mediator. Also, the sphere in which the high priest represented the people was in matters related to God, namely, “to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.” The OT priest, then, served as the representative mediator of the people before God due to their sin; at its heart, his work was one of propitiation and expiation.

Involved in the OT priest’s work are a number of important truths:

(1) As they offered sacrifices for sins before God there was no separation between the provision of atonement and its application to the people. As this is brought to fulfillment in Christ, as Hebrews teaches, it becomes clear that the ineffectual nature of the old covenant was *not* due to the bifurcation between provision and application but the inferior nature of the sacrifices (Heb. 10:4, 11). In Christ, however, we have the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice. His death achieves a complete atonement *and* application to his new covenant people.

(2) Under the old covenant, the sacrifices offered were “relatively” efficacious for the people, that is, God never intended the sacrificial system to effect *ultimate* salvation; they functioned as types and shadows of a greater priest and sacrifice to come (Heb. 10:1–18). As we move to the new covenant, shadow gives way to reality and we discover how Christ’s priestly work provides for and is effectively applied to all those in the covenant he mediates.

(3) The OT priest’s role is always in terms of the application of his office to the one he represents in terms of offering and intercession. This is also true of Christ, yet in a far greater way, he not only secures our perfect redemption but also applies it to his people effectively.

Second, let us think about how Christ is the fulfillment of the OT priest in his entire work. Hebrews unpacks this glorious truth for us. Here are some points to consider. Christ both *fulfills* and *transcends* the work of the OT priest, and thus is greater. Just as the OT priest was *selected*, so Christ is *divinely called* by the Fa-

ther and *appointed* to this office (5:4–6; cf. Pss. 2; 110). Just as the OT priest *represented* a definite people before God, so Christ as the new covenant mediator represents *everyone* in that covenant, and does so effectively. Just as the OT priest offered sacrifices for sins (5:1; 8:3), including his own, which could never ultimately take away sins (10:4, 11), so Christ offered himself. As a result, Christ’s work achieved a definitive, once-for-all-time atonement (7:27; 9:12; 10:15–18) so that, unlike the OT priest, “he is able to save completely those who come to God through him” (7:25).

Patterned after the OT priest, Christ provides *and* applies his work to the people. Also, just as the OT priests’ work was unified yet imperfect, so Christ’s work is unified yet perfect in provision and intercession. In regard to intercession, our Lord, as priest, effectively prays for his people *before* the cross (Luke 22:31–32; John 17:6–26) and *after* his ascension (7:24–25; Rom. 8:32–34; 1 John 2:1–2), guaranteeing that all the new covenant blessings are applied to them (see John 17:6–19; Rom. 8:28–29; Heb. 7:23–28).

In thinking of Christ’s new covenant work, an important question needs to be asked: Does Christ represent all people without exception (a “mixed” group) and only make salvation possible for them, or does he represent a *specific* people who are *effectively* brought to salvation and receive all the benefits of the new covenant *including the Spirit’s work of application*? Scripture teaches the latter and not the former. The NT presents Christ’s work as a new covenant work (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 5–10). Additionally, Scripture teaches that what is “new” about the new covenant is that the *entire* covenant people will be born of and gifted by the Spirit and justified before God. These truths are taught by anticipation in the OT (e.g., Jer. 31:29–34; Ezek. 11:19–20; 36:25–27; Joel 2:28–32; cf. Num. 11:27–29), and in the NT as realities due to Christ’s work (John 7:39; Acts 2:33; Rom. 8:9). Thus, the old covenant included all the physical seed of Abraham, spiritual and unspiritual; hence, they were a “mixed” people, both regener-



ate and unregenerate. But under the new covenant this is no longer the case. This is why the new covenant is better than the old: it is effective and it will not fail, due to Christ's *greater* priesthood and work.

This point must not be overlooked. Given that Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant, and it is completely effective in its provision *and* application, it is difficult to deny (unless one embraces universalism) that Christ's priestly work is both definite and effective. Thus, *all* whom Jesus represented are, in time, regenerated, justified, and brought to glory. Not one of them will be lost since our Lord, as the *greater* priest, does not fail. For those for whom he died as their covenant head, his work is effectively applied by the Spirit, the same Spirit whose new covenant work is effectively secured by Christ's atoning death.

## II. DEFINITE ATONEMENT AND THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

What does definite atonement have to do with the nature of the church? Everything. If our Lord is the mediator of the new covenant and its subjects are a regenerate, believing people, then it is difficult to think of the new covenant people as a "mixed" community like Israel of old, at least by covenantal *design* (certainly, churches sometimes error and admit unbelievers). Our Lord, as the high priest and mediator of the new covenant, represents those in the covenant community alone and those in the covenant are constituted as a *regenerate, believing* people.

This entails, then, that there is a crucial link between the priestly argument for definite atonement and a regenerate view of the church. Why? Because both views contend for the same understanding of the *nature* of the new covenant community. This is why a regenerate view of the church goes together with an embrace of definite atonement. Conversely, it seems that a non-defi-

nite atonement view fits better with a “mixed” view of the church, although many in Reformed theology reject this conclusion.

Why? Because in Reformed, covenantal views of the church, they contend that the church is constituted like Israel under the old covenant, namely as a “mixed” people. The locus of the covenant community and the locus of the elect are distinct under both covenants. On the other hand, Baptists (and the believers’ church tradition) argue for a regenerate view of the church since only those who have professed that they have repented of their sin and believed in Christ have entered into the new covenant. In fact, this is the primary reason why Baptists contend that the covenant sign of the new covenant church, namely baptism, is reserved only for those who have been born of the Spirit, justified before God, and thus become partakers of the new covenant by God’s grace. Although circumcision and baptism are both covenant signs, they do not signify the same realities due to their respective covenantal differences.

No doubt some try to avoid this conclusion by combining either a regenerate view of the church with a universal atonement *or* a definite atonement with a “mixed” view of the church, but there are serious problems in such attempts. For example, Reformed theology that contends for a definite atonement *and* a “mixed” view of the church must limit the new covenant to “believers and their children” and not “all without exception.” This, however, is difficult to argue biblically, and it seems to undercut their defense of definite atonement. On the other hand, many Baptists argue for a general/universal atonement *and* a regenerate view of the church, but then have difficulty explaining how Christ is the mediator of the new covenant if he is dying for those outside of that covenant. In fact, in dying for the non-elect, what specific covenant is Christ actually mediating since those in the new covenant are justified, sanctified, and glorified? One is either “in Christ” and thus in the new covenant, or “in Adam” and thus *not* in the new covenant.

A more biblical view is to argue that Christ as the head and high priest of the new covenant entails *both* a definite atonement *and* a regenerate ecclesiology. As God's covenants unfold across time and reach their fulfillment in Christ and the new covenant, Scripture teaches us to embrace a Savior who saves, a cross that effectively accomplishes and secures every gracious new covenant promise, *and* a regenerate community that he purchases with his own blood who will forever know the glorious benefits of the new covenant applied to them. What does definite atonement have to do with church membership and thus a regenerate view of the church? Everything.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Believe in Particular Redemption? Then Evangelize and Send Missionaries with Abandon

Greg Turner

Everyone has heard it. “If you’re a Calvinist, then you don’t believe in evangelism and missions.” Even though the stereotype is easy to disprove from church history—names like George Whitfield, William Carey, and Lottie Moon immediately come to mind—the assumption remains widespread and popular. Somehow, if you believe that God is sovereign in salvation, you *can’t* take the Great Commission seriously, and if it happens that you do (as with Whitfield, Carey, Moon, and a host of others), your commitment to evangelism and mission must somehow be *despite* your Calvinism. It couldn’t possibly be *because* of it.

If this is true of Reformed theology in general, then it’s especially true of the doctrine of particular redemption. In the popular non-Reformed imagination, this represents the nadir of anti-evangelistic thinking. After all, if you can’t tell unconverted sinners that Jesus died for *them*, then how can you share the gospel at all?

Both missions history and historical theology demonstrate the fallacy of these assumptions. However, the purpose of this article isn't to argue for particular redemption. John Owen made an exhaustive biblical case for the doctrine in his magisterial *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, summarized brilliantly and made accessible to the modern reader in J.I. Packer's introductory essay in the Banner of Truth edition. Nor is it to prove that it's possible to share the gospel within the framework of particular redemption. A simple survey of the evangelistic sermons in the New Testament reveals that not a single one tells the unconverted that Jesus died for them. If the apostles could proclaim the gospel in a manner consistent with particular redemption every time they engaged in evangelism, then it certainly is possible today.

### **PARTICULAR REDEMPTION ENCOURAGES & IMPELS**

But the purpose of this article is more radical than that. After all, belief in particular redemption doesn't just *allow* for the possibility of evangelism and missions. Properly understood from Scripture, belief in this doctrine *encourages* and even *impels* the people of God to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Particular redemption is shorthand for the biblical teaching that Jesus actually procured the salvation of the sinners who would be saved. In other words, Jesus didn't just die to make my salvation possible. His death actually, particularly, and infallibly saved me—and everyone else who would ever be saved. He was a substitute, and he died personally, specifically, and effectually for all of my sins.

Then, in keeping with the Father's choice and the Son's redemption, God the Holy Spirit effectually called me (along with the entire multitude of the redeemed), granting me new birth and the gift of faith in Jesus. Two elements in this glorious plan of salvation need to be stressed.

## THE PLAN OF SALVATION

First, the sovereign God who decreed the salvation of his people also decreed the means by which this salvation would be accomplished. These means include an incredible host of providential circumstances, such as where I was born, whom I met as I walked through life, and what I read. He ordained all those things, and all of them were essential to my access to the gospel. However, the irreplaceable element in those means, for me and all the redeemed, was the proclamation of the gospel. The God who chose me and ransomed me also commanded his people to declare his good news to sinners indiscriminately, and he inseparably connected the inward call of the Holy Spirit with the outward call of the gospel message. You can't separate particular redemption and effectual calling from evangelism.

The second element that needs to be stressed is the intentional scope of the people God redeemed through the substitutionary death of Jesus: "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). Two chapters on, this company of those who were particularly and definitively redeemed by the blood of Jesus are described as a multitude no one could count from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. In other words, the efficacious sacrifice of Jesus was vast and global in both its intention and its effect. That has been the plan of God from Genesis onward. There will be evangelistic fruit from every people and nation on earth because the Son particularly redeemed sinners from every people and nation on earth.

These two elements together are the best possible encouragement for missions and evangelism. We have a glorious gospel to take to the people around us and to the ends of the earth. As God himself in human flesh, Jesus lived and died as our particular substitute who effectively secured salvation for us in the company of a global multitude of redeemed sinners. He rose again from the dead, the eternal victor over sin, death, and hell. He commanded

his people to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations. All who repent and believe will be saved.

### **NO HEART IS TOO HARD**

You see, the fruit of our evangelistic efforts isn't dependent on our cleverness or persuasiveness, but on the sovereign power of God, who doesn't just offer salvation, but actually saves sinners. There is no place too hard and no people group too resistant. For many, many missionaries (like William Carey, Adoniram Judson, and Lottie Moon), missionary work among seemingly resistant people was only possible because the death of Jesus actually and definitely saved particular sinners among those people, and the sovereignty of God was one of their strongest motivations in undertaking such a task. That remains true for countless missionaries today.

Furthermore, because the global scope of Jesus' redeeming work is an irremovable element in the atonement, trusting in the work of Christ connects a believer irreversibly to the global purposes of God. If you claim to believe in particular redemption, but you're not somehow engaged in sending missionaries to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, then you haven't really understood what particular redemption means.

From Genesis to Revelation, God makes it clear that he intends to take a people for himself from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. The death and resurrection of Jesus efficaciously made that certain. We are saved to the praise of his glory, and he has ordained that we declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. If you're not engaged in evangelism and missions, then you don't really believe in particular redemption.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# 3 Reasons Definite Atonement is Basic to Biblical Missions



Alex Kocman

“Sit down, young man. When God decides to save the heathen, he will do it without your help.”

These were the words of John Ryland to a passionate, young English Particular Baptist named William Carey, now known to us as the father of the modern missionary movement.

Since then, the temptation to pit Reformed theology and missions against each other as enemies has continued to plague the broader evangelical movement, despite the Calvinistic *bona fides* of Carey and countless others like him. “If you’re a Calvinist, you must not really believe in evangelism”—so goes the logic.

Men like William Carey and Andrew Fuller, and more modern writers like J.I. Packer in his *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, have demonstrated repeatedly that the Reformed emphasis on particular redemption is the sweet companion of the missionary endeavor and not its antagonist. But in our day and age, for



some observers, another sticky question remains—the question of that pesky “L” in the “TULIP.” How can someone possibly believe that Christ died only for the elect and still feel any motivation to carry the gospel over land and sea?

When it comes to the doctrine of definite (or limited) atonement, there is a real, driving temptation to hedge one’s bets or drown one’s commitment to the doctrine in a sea of ambiguity. After all, nobody enjoys the opposition one is sure to receive by disputing the popular sentiment that Christ died for every single individual in the world.

But in order to preserve the vibrant missionary zeal of men like Carey, it’s critical we view definite atonement not only as true but *essential*, forming the biblical basis of mission itself. Why?

## **1. DEFINITE ATONEMENT SECURES THE PURPOSE OF MISSION.**

The global mission of the church is gloriously *particular* in purpose, designed by God as the means by which he draws in those for whom Christ died.

In the book of Isaiah, we read prophetic words that speak far beyond the regathering of the Jewish exiles and look forward to global, spiritual fulfillment in the New Covenant age: “I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made” (Isaiah 43:6–7 ESV).

When Christ commissions his messengers to go into the world, they are sent for the express task of finding *his* people. When our Master tells his servants to “go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:23), it’s because he has “other sheep that are not of this fold” (John 10:16).

In effect, our marching orders from Christ are—“I have elected people from every nation, *so go get them.*”

If Christ died for all indiscriminately, yet no one in particular, there is little to compel us out of our proverbial Jerusalems and Samarias to the ends of the earth. But if Christ died for the elect from every nation, that necessitates the extension of the gospel offer to every people group, nation state, language, and tribe.

## **2. DEFINITE ATONEMENT PRESERVES THE *MODE OF MISSION.***

Definite atonement not only secures the purpose of our mission as being the retrieval of God’s elect from the corrupt mass of humanity; it also magnifies the mode of mission, the preaching of Christ *himself*.

Christ, as real, perfect, and effectual intercessor for his people, is the centripetal force in mission—the magnetic center of all our public and private proclamation. “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). The power that draws people to Christ takes effect when he is held up as real-ly and definitively able to save all who come to him.

The problem with a hypothetically universal doctrine of the atonement (that Christ died for all individuals but the atonement is ineffectual unless the individual exercises faith) is that Christ is less than a complete Savior. He makes salvation possible, but doesn’t actually *accomplish* it. Thus, consistently applied, this theology on the mission field will inevitably lead to preaching faith *itself* (as a meritorious decision) rather than preaching Christ himself as able to save (with faith simply being the act which unites us to him). We are to preach Christ himself (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 4:5), and that means preaching a Christ who decisively saves.

A Christ who can only save you with your own permission isn’t a Christ worth taking to the unreached peoples of the world. Nor

is he Paul's Christ, who knocked a stubbornly rebellious Paul off his literal high horse and saved him unilaterally to "display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:16).

The Christ whom we proclaim among the world's 4 billion unreached is "able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25)—even to the point of sovereignly, by his Spirit, granting the very saving faith we naturally lack. Every one of the elect who are yet unreached has his or her name graven on the hands of this perfect Intercessor (Isaiah 49:16).

### **3. DEFINITE ATONEMENT ENSURES THE *OUTCOME OF MISSION*.**

Who are the objects of the atonement? Revelation 5 definitively settles the question with words carrying vast import for cross-cultural ministry: "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." (vv. 9-10).

Christ's blood can never be ineffectual. Hence, two chapters later, John reports seeing in heaven "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands" (Revelation 7:9). Mission accomplished.

Simply put, the Great Commission is simply too daunting if there is no guarantee of its outcome. But if Christ died to purchase real individuals from every nation—people with *names*—then we know that the global church, as it fulfills Christ's mandate in history, literally cannot fail.

If Jesus died for all indiscriminately, yet no one in particular, we are left scouring the seas for fish with no guarantee of a catch. We, as fishers of men (cf. Matthew 4:19), are called to fish indiscriminately. We don't know who the elect are, nor are we encouraged to guess. But recall Christ's instructions to his disciples on the boat: "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some" (John 21:6). Our Lord has appointed the catch. Likewise, the definitive nature and particular scope of Christ's atoning death mean that the global church's nets *will* be filled. The cross guarantees that.

Ideas have consequences. Although God often uses well-meaning ministers and missionaries who are still growing in their theology, the fact that God draws straight lines with crooked sticks doesn't authorize us to stay crooked. Definite atonement isn't popular, but it's glorious—and it helps form the very crux of missions.

God didn't just choose a plan of salvation; he chose *people*. Jesus died for *them*. And the Spirit changes their hearts and saves them. So let's go get them.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

This article originally appeared on the Founders Ministries website.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# Dilapidated Buildings, Small Budgets, and Struggling Congregations: How Irresistible Grace Creates Steadfastness in Ministry



Jonathan Worsley

It's Tuesday morning. You're driving to the church office, reflecting on your sermon from Sunday. It seemed to go alright. Trouble is, several key families were absent. Will the church survive? You wonder about the offering. Will the church be able to make budget? You arrive at the church building, park, walk in, and, for the hundredth time, slightly wince at the sight of the building's disrepair.

Ever feel this way? In fact, the doctrine of God's irresistible grace is for you, right now, right here, on Tuesday morning.

We remember on Sunday that "salvation belongs to the Lord!" (Ps. 3:8). Our heads know that God is in the resurrection business, making people alive in Christ (Eph. 2:1, 5; Col. 2:13). Without God's call, we would never come to Jesus. With it, we come (Jn. 6:44–45). We consider the unbelievers who may be sitting in our pews and encourage ourselves with promises like Isaiah 55:11: "My word that goes out from my mouth shall not return void, but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." These are good reflections.

But Sunday isn't the only day to take hope in the doctrine of irresistible grace. Irresistible grace ought to stay our anxiety and give us hope that God can bring the lost to himself when we discover on Monday morning that the church roof is leaking; or when the treasurer tells us on Wednesday that we won't be able to afford a pastoral intern; or on Friday evening when the sermon is finally coming together and we hear that the vast majority of our small congregation will be out of town on Sunday.

I lead a small church in an affluent part of London. I've been ministering here for almost five years and have received some encouragement at what the Lord is doing. In fact, our church has seen 700 percent growth. We started with three members, and we now have 21!

But I can still be discouraged by our comparatively small numbers. At the start of the week, I sometimes wander around our church building, dismayed that we've already outgrown our tiny children's room. I stare at our church's mission budget and wonder how we can possibly make even the smallest dent in our city of secularists, nominal Christians, and Muslims. I ponder the fact that a number of our members will likely leave in the summer due to work.

What's the result of all this worry? I'd love to say that it leads to more passionate prayer and more delight in God's sovereignty. But I fear more often than not I'm tempted to pragmatic planning and more doggedness amid the visible fruitlessness. *What if we extend the building? . . . What if we raise money for this evangelistic event? . . . What if this family moves to the area?*

Of course, extending the building, planning evangelistic events, and reaching new ministry partners are all good things. But we cannot put our hope for ministry success in them.

I'm not telling you to stop using Monday mornings for a furious brainstorming session with white board pens in hand. I am telling you such efforts are worth little apart from the staid work of persevering faithfulness with hands closed in prayer. So begin the working week remembering that God is totally sovereign. He longs to draw sinners into his church, and when he does it will be impossible for any of them to resist his grace. Nothing will defeat God's certain plans and promises. "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps" (Prov. 16:9). This glorious fact is as true in our first step of faith as it is in our every step thereafter.

My own conversion story bears this out. I was ten. A group of us were playing football (or soccer, for you Americans out there) in the church hall at a youth event. The leaders told us to gather up in the middle of the room. We sat down. A mother of one of the children stuck three circles on a large piece of cardboard—one red, one orange, one green. She then spoke about prayer: God sometimes says "yes" (green light), sometimes says "wait" (orange light), and sometimes says "no" (red light). It wasn't a compelling message. I wouldn't even say it was altogether articulate. But she said enough to convince me that, not only did I not pray, but I did not have a relationship with God. I had spent the first decade of my life ignoring the one who had given me everything. Like Christian on the earliest pages of *Pilgrim's Progress*, I felt the

burden of sin on my back for the first time. When the meeting finished, I labored home under the weight of my newfound load. I told my mother in no uncertain terms that I wanted to become a Christian. And that very evening, after walking through the gospel with her, I did.

Did all this result from the pastor's remarkable planning? Had the gospel been delivered in the most gripping way, by the most commanding person in the room? No. That night, God gave me a new heart. As with the deaf man in Mark 7, God put his fingers in my ears and said: "*Ephphatha!* (Be Opened!)." Yes, someone worked hard to ensure there was a weekly youth gathering. Someone labored at preparing a message. Someone refereed the football match. And, yes, someone even cut out those red, orange, and green traffic lights. God surely used these labors.

But I didn't ultimately believe because the football game was fun, or because the youth group was compelling, or because the message was just right. I believed the gospel because the overwhelming mercy of a sovereign God drew me to himself and gave me the gifts of faith and repentance. His grace was unstoppable.

In 2019, as I look at my own ministry, I need to recall more often that 10-year-old boy sitting on the church carpet who came to Christ, not because of human ingenuity, but because of God's grace. Brother pastors, if we are to persevere with steadfastness and faithfulness, we must meditate regularly on the wonderful doctrine of irresistible grace.

God's grace *is* irresistible.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Why Your Doctrine of Perseverance Demands Church Discipline



Raymond M. Johnson

**J**ohn grew up in what could easily be described as a traditional evangelical church—marked by contemporary/blended music and sermons with bits of Scripture interspersed and heart-warming thoughts about God.

When John was 10 years old, he heard “the gospel.” According to his memory, the gospel centers on the idea that God loved him and had a wonderful plan for his life. God wanted to give him eternal life if he would turn from his sins and make a decision to follow Jesus. He remembers walking down the aisle of his church as the choir sang “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.”

Fast-forward 20 years. John is married with two kids. He’s not a member of any church, but he does attend on Christmas and Easter. When asked by a friend who had just begun to have interest in Christianity, “John, are you a Christian?” He replied, “Well yes, of course.”

His friend was a bit more persistent than John had anticipated. A follow-up question: “I’m struggling to know if I’m a Christian, and I wonder how you know that you are a Christian?” Without hesitation, John replied, “I walked down the aisle of our church when I was 10 years old and decided to follow Jesus.” Intrigued, his friend asked, “What does it mean to follow Jesus?” At this point, John was silent. He had no idea what it meant to follow Christ.

So, based on this line of questioning, is John a Christian? Is John “persevering” in the faith?

## **CONVERSION CONFUSION**

At some point, John had embraced the doctrine “once saved, always saved” but had relinquished any notion that the truly saved persevere in the faith. Apart from his childhood connection to a church, John’s life looked little different than an unbeliever’s.

Scripture constantly warns about the danger of false conversion. At the return of Christ, many people will be banished from the presence of the God they claim to know (Matt. 25:41). True conversion is rooted in the effectual work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:8). The Holy Spirit makes us a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). As a new creature in Christ Jesus, the Christian grows in personal holiness—what the Bible calls sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3). Sanctification occurs as Christians meditate on and submit to the will of God (Rom 12:1–2) as they reside in a new family (the church) and are conformed into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28–30).

## **PERSEVERANCE AS PRESERVATION**

Perseverance in the ways of God is best understood as preservation by the Spirit through the written Word of God in a church. A “once saved, always saved” motif that doesn’t understand conver-

sion and its vital connection to a church shouldn't comfort anyone in any way.

Consider John 10:28. Here, Jesus unequivocally states that he and he alone grants eternal life to individuals. He says these individuals will never perish. This claim is astounding. When Jesus grants eternal life to a person on earth, death is rendered powerless. Jesus said no one would take them out of his hand. It's by his hand they were created, and it's in his hand they remain secure.

In light of these doctrinal clarifications, what should faithful churches make of people like John who forthrightly state they are Christians but have no active love for Christ or his church? Is John a Christian? Is it possible for a man like John to be a Christian if he has no affection for or endurance with Christ and his church? Has John persevered?

## **DANGEROUS DELUSIONS**

Christians live out their conversion in anticipation and preparation with other Christians in a local church. Together, they're being fitted for heaven as they worship, learn, and grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. A churchless conversion (a "decision for Christ" in the past apart from the present reality of sanctification in a community of faith) more easily leads to apostasy. Too often, modern evangelism practices traffic in a flimsy doctrine of conversion that results in decisions without discipleship and professing Christians who value their independence from a church. Such people are more likely to be duped by false assurance.

However, when a biblical understanding of conversion is recovered, the revival of church discipline will follow. If marking out the church from the world is the fruit of conversion, then discipline (both formative and corrective) becomes the mechanism for inspecting the genuineness of conversion. When discipline is

wholly neglected, churches tend to fall into disrepute as the gospel their members' lives profess is diluted.

When discipline is practiced faithfully, the purity of the church is protected and with it the witness of Christ and his gospel in a particular community. If, as the author of Hebrews states, “the Lord disciplines the one he loves” (Heb. 12:6), and that discipline often happens in the context of the church (Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5), then the presence of disciplinary care becomes a means by which believers persevere in the faith (Heb. 12:7).<sup>29</sup>

Whether John realizes it or not, his soul is in danger. His mind is warped by a false doctrine that endures largely due to unhealthy churches and a wrong understanding of conversion. What must be made clear by every true church is that conversion to Christ is mandatory for every man or woman who claims to be a Christian, and that every true conversion will result in lifelong perseverance (Matt. 18:3; Acts 17:30–31; Phil. 1:6).

False doctrines about assurance are pervasive in our modern church culture. They must be confronted and gently rooted out of the minds of people who falsely—and with good intentions—claim to be Christians.

And yet, how many of us have friends and family members who, though claiming to be Christians, live like John and think like John, while “their” church says nothing? In such cases, churches become complicit in perpetuating a false assurance of “once saved, always saved.” More likely, the person was “not saved, never saved” in the first place.

Pastoral care of these self-deceived souls will be difficult. But pastors must clearly teach that there can be no assurance of salvation outside the scope of God's revealed Word.

With great difficulty, we must make sure every self-deceived, self-professing “Christian” is aware that it is a dangerous error to

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<sup>29</sup> This paragraph is informed by Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 121-124.

be disconnected from a local church. We must lovingly confront them, informing them of the grief that awaits. The coming day of the Lord could result in their banishment from God's presence (Matt. 7:21-23). Over time, we hope their presence in a vibrant church will introduce them to the true pursuit of holiness together with the people of God.

The Christian life cannot be whatever one wishes it was. It must be derived from Scripture, ordered around the life of a church, and vibrant in the life of all professing believers. Anything less cannot be considered Christianity. Anything less will not persevere.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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# Book Review: Humble Calvinism

J. A. MEDDERS,

THE GOOD BOOK COMPANY, 2019. 160 PAGES.



**REVIEWED BY JEFF MOONEY**

I cannot recall the number of times that I have heard something tantamount to “I would never be a Calvinist because of this guy/church/professor I know.” The fact of the matter is those of us in the reformed camp know that we sometimes struggle with arrogance. J. A. Medders seeks to provide us a way out.

He notes that the book was written for the problem I described above, written because the problem with Calvinism is “Calvinists like me.” (13) He seeks to “crack open the five points . . . so that we can see what happens when the points get into our hearts” (27). The goal of this? To transcend simply studying the doctrines of grace and embrace the grace of our doctrine—embarrassingly, to see “Christ in our Calvinism” (28).

Medders distinguishes between “Head-Calvinism” and “Heart-Calvinism” in an effort to wean his readership from the first to the second. He provides both historical comments and personal anecdotes to achieve this goal.

A helpful section of the book for the novice to all things reformed appears in between chapters 1 and 2: *A Short Interlude about Jargon and Church History*. In this practical excursus, the author introduces less theological readers to the terms and history of Calvinism, as well as to the “jargon, acronyms, and name drops needed to enjoy this book” (36).

Chapter 2 provides the author’s apologetic for his title, which he admits might sound like an oxymoron to some but most certainly is not in its truest form.

My hope for this book is that you’ll see the points of Calvinism not as lights in which to bask but as a lit path toward enjoying Jesus, the light of the world, personally and powerfully (43).

The author unpacks and repackages the five points from chapters three to seven. Throughout, Medders provides clear descriptions of each point, reorients each point through the lens of Christ, and then provides helpful and encouraging, if not sometimes painful, pastoral and practical implications. In one particularly helpful section, Medders unpacks the doctrine of perseverance and provides the reader with healthy evaluative questions for any believer.

Are you lukewarm toward other believers? Do you actually pray for others when you say you will? Do you pursue meeting up with those who are struggling? Do you risk a comfortable friendship in order to give, with tears in your eyes, a necessary rebuke? Don’t belittle the role of the saints in your perseverance or your role in theirs (150).

Medders’ book is full of memorable and compelling descriptions of warm-hearted, humble Calvinism. Christ savoring Calvinism is soul food (48).

- Sin is when we live like the most relevant reality in the universe is irrelevant, ignorable, and even idiotic (56).
- We're free to recognize, praise, and celebrate the doing of good in this world. Helping the least of these in the world is good. It's just not good enough to save you or to cancel out or overcome your depravity (58).
- "The first point of Calvinism is about more than how totally depraved we are - it reveals how we are totally dependent on Jesus (67).
- Now if you know God loved you like that, you go love others the same. The way of God's love is the way we love others. It's unconditional. It's about us choosing to love, regardless of what comes back (80).
- He didn't atone for the sins of the soil beneath your feet - but he did die to release the soil from the burden, decay, and groaning caused by the sins of those who tread on it (104).
- Satan would love for us to find pride in how we understand the humble cross of Christ. Don't give in. Consider every Arminian, every Four Pointer, every Christian as more important than yourself . . . Look for ways you can love them and serve them, regardless of whether they are fully 'Calvinized.' Christ, not Calvinism, is all (112).

This compilation characterizes the book as a whole. There is simple but rich reformed preaching here. Medders provides a plethora of quotes from historic heroes of reformed theology that clearly promote a Calvinism that is happily married to a robust, evangelistic, practical theology. All in all, you are missing out if you don't read this book.

If there are points that need redirection in the book, they are few.

For instance, some of Medders' illustrations regarding limited atonement I found unhelpful and confusing. But these minor quibbles aside, the book is accessible, instructive, and edifying.

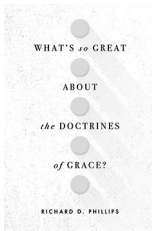


I cannot recall the number of times that Calvinists have given a bad name to their own theology. This book is a simple, straightforward, and humble correction and encouragement to follow the Savior from the reformed ranks. Medders provides all who join him with a satisfying and God-glorifying path to follow.

# Book Review: What's So Great About the Doctrines of Grace?

**RICHARD PHILLIPS,**

**REFORMATION TRUST, 2008. 97 PAGES.**



**REVIEWED BY CLINT HUMFREY**

Calvinism is one of those words that has a clear meaning for some and a vague meaning for others. Getting to the heart of the matter, Richard Phillips has written a book that provides definitions while also sweeping away caricatures. He clarifies Calvinism for a non-technical audience but also does something few books like this are able to do. He provides careful theological reasoning that's both pastorally sensitive and edifying.

## **CLARIFYING THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE**

Phillips surveys the so-called five points of Calvinism or “doctrines of grace” in the order many Calvinists have come to expect:

Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. He gives clear descriptions and vivid illustrations of these points along with applications for the believer's life.

Phillips, a long-serving pastor and theologian, knows well the impact the doctrines of grace can have in the life of the Christian. For some who discover the beauty of God's sovereignty, he says, "It's like being born again, again" (4). This reminder of the beauty and transformative power of the doctrines of grace is helpful. As the pan-Reformed or "gospel-centered" movement expands, it might have a tendency to revert simply to one more social tribe and lose the drama of this discovery.

Though the book is organized topically, each chapter brims with biblical insight as Phillips exposit a biblical text as the spine of his argument. For example, he employs Isaiah 6 to show how believing in the sovereignty of God starts with a life-changing, personal encounter with God's character. He then surveys biblical figures who had personal encounters with God and explains how those encounters shaped their view of God's absolute sovereignty. He addresses Isaiah's vision, Paul on the Damascus road, Jonah in the whale, and Habakkuk in the watchtower.

By focusing on Scripture, Phillips' theological reflections remain warm-hearted and edifying. His biographical vignettes of biblical characters show that real people encountered the living God personally, and this transformed everything! Phillips could have chosen to stress the Reformed pedigree for these doctrines, but that would have made the doctrines accessible only for trained theologians. Instead, he shows that the doctrines of grace are plain in Scripture and therefore accessible to every saint.

Along the way, Phillips deftly anticipates objections. In Chapter 3, for example, he rebuts two charges: that unconditional election makes God unfair, and that people can't be blamed if God is

totally sovereign. He handles these objections concisely so that the reader isn't bogged down with philosophical arguments.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is a helpful devotional refresher for a pastor. Pastors likely won't learn anything new, but by considering the glowing piety these doctrines ought to produce, they will perhaps be reawakened to the beauty and spiritual vitality of the doctrines of grace.

At the end of each chapter, Phillips includes a "What's So Great About..." section. These sections provide useful templates for a pastor to consider in his regular preaching ministry. Do we regularly pause in a sermon and draw out the goodness and wonder of the truths we are explaining?

This book is not just suitable for pastors; newer Christians should read it, too. Unlike other treatments, Phillips' avoids the accumulation of theological buzzwords. If you pastor a church largely untaught regarding the doctrines of grace, you might hand this book to church members and ask them to jot down the main passages Phillips unpacks. If a new Christian did that, their theological compass would be set on the right course.

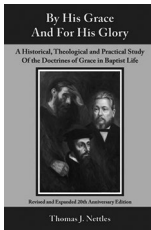
You could also give this book to a seminarian or pastoral intern as a companion to a systematic theology. Too often, academic theology has the tendency to produce cold prose with no application. All doctrine should raise our affections for God.

Phillips' book is the doxological antidote to anyone suffering from the so-called "cage stage" fascination with Calvinism. Thankfully, *What's So Great about the Doctrines of Grace* will re-acquaint people with both the truth of the doctrines of grace and the piety that should flow from them.

# Book Review: By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life.

THOMAS J. NETTLES,

REVISED AND EXPANDED. FOUNDERS PRESS, 2006. 486 PAGES.



REVIEWED BY ADAM TRIPLETT

“Are you a Calvinist?”  
I knew the question would come up, but I didn’t think it would come so quickly. It was the second question I was asked by the pastoral search team of the church I now pastor.

I responded with a clarifying question, “What do you mean by ‘Calvinist?’”

“You know, Calvinists don’t believe in evangelism and missions. They don’t believe you should preach the gospel.”

My response?

“Well, sir, if that’s what you believe a Calvinist to be, then I am certainly not one.”

And yet, I understood where this long-time Baptist was coming from. I’ve heard the argument often, especially in the southern United States. Many falsely believe that to be a Baptist and hold to the doctrines of grace (Calvinism’s more biblical title) is an impossibility. This assumption has been undergirded by the false notion that if you believe the doctrines of grace, then you must be opposed to proclaiming this grace to all freely and without exception.

Over my short time caring for my church I have sought to shepherd them to embrace a biblical understanding of God’s grace. As depraved sinners, we are drawn by the Holy Spirit, justified by Christ’s blood and righteousness, and preserved by God for all eternity. It has been my aim to help them see that these truths are not only biblical, but they’ve also been a deep-rooted conviction of many Baptists throughout the centuries.

This is where Tom Nettles’ book has been a great gift to me—and many other pastors like me.

In *By His Grace and for His Glory*, Nettles, widely regarded as one of the foremost Baptist historians in America, examines prominent Baptist theologians, pastors, and missionaries throughout the past and how they maintained a rich Calvinistic theology while remaining strongly evangelical in their preaching and desire to reach the nations.

Ultimately, the book shows that not only do the doctrines of grace have a place in Baptist life, but, because of the authority of Scripture and a desire to maintain doctrinal fidelity, those who held to these truths were able to overcome many of the theological errors that troubled their fellow Baptists in centuries past. As

Nettles says early on, “The purest biblical presentation of the gospel glides upon the waters of the doctrines of grace. Indeed, any rejection of these doctrines carries within it seeds that sprout into nonevangelical positions” (27).

With that, here are a few more highlights from the book.

### **SKETCHES OF GREAT BAPTISTS**

The first half of the book is composed of simple, straightforward sketches of Baptists throughout the centuries. Starting with Benjamin Keach and John Bunyan, Nettles lays the foundation for how the earliest Baptists held tightly to the doctrines of grace. From here, he moves through the centuries and highlights Baptists in Europe and the United States of America. Men like Andrew Fuller, John Leland, Adoniram Judson, John L. Dagg, and James P. Boyce all affirmed these doctrines. Throughout these biographies Nettles highlights how their commitment to the doctrines of grace guided their ministries. Ultimately, he shows that many of the best Baptist theologians and pastors were men who saw Scripture to be clear on God’s sovereignty in salvation and fought for these truths with precision and vibrancy.

Perhaps the most helpful section of these theological biographies is Nettles’ assessment of the theological developments that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this time, adherence to the doctrines of grace declined in evangelical life. For someone who’s thankful for both doctrinal depth and the cooperation found within the Southern Baptist Convention, this section helped me better understand where our Baptist forefathers stood their ground and where they seemingly went astray.

For these historical sketches alone, the book is worth reading. But Nettles doesn’t stop there.

## A RICK BAPTIST THEOLOGY FOR TODAY

In the second and third sections of the book, Nettles provides a biblical defense of the doctrines of grace and shows how these doctrines should work themselves out in life and ministry. While his arguments are technical at some points, they're largely straightforward and deal with each doctrine concisely, answering objections along the way.

How might this book be helpful to pastors today?

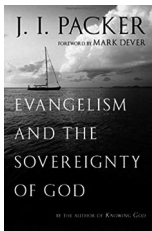
First, *By His Grace and for His Glory* is an instructive resource for pastors as they help others who may misunderstand the historicity or importance of the doctrines of grace in Baptist life. Whether you point to specific individuals like the missionary endeavors of Luther Rice or the educational contributions of Basil Manly (Sr. and Jr.), this book provides compelling evidence that Calvinist Baptists have made rich contributions to evangelism, missions, church planting, and theological education.

Second, Nettles' work can help pastors and members alike better understand *how* the doctrines of grace undergird and fuel passionate evangelism and missionary endeavors. By giving example after example, Nettles shows how godly men and women who treasured the doctrines of grace gave themselves to the work of the ministry while also helping readers see how these theological convictions gave rise to and shaped missionary zeal. These godly examples should be a great encouragement to our own faith as they model for us the effect the doctrines of grace should have in our own lives.



# Book Review: Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God

**J. I. PACKER**



**REVIEWED BY MARK CARRINGTON**

If God is sovereign, then why do I share the gospel? If he's doing the saving, then why bother evangelizing? For me, reconciling God's sovereignty with my responsibility to proclaim the gospel was not easy. It was a crisis of faith that ebbed and flowed over three years. How could the Bible teach that God is sovereign in salvation *and* that we must share the gospel?

## **UNDERSTANDING THE ARGUMENT**

Packer's book offers a concise and compelling argument unpacking how evangelism and the sovereignty of God co-exist, and if properly understood, enhance one another. In this book, Packer isn't defending the doctrine of God's sovereignty, *per se*. He's ar-

guing that the doctrine of divine sovereignty doesn't inhibit evangelism, but sustains it and gives us, the evangelists, the "resilience we need to evangelize boldly and persistently" (15).

Packer argues that the supposed inconsistency between God's sovereignty and the need to evangelize is an imposition on the text of Scripture. This false dichotomy comes from "error in the church—the intruding of rationalistic speculations, the passion for systematic consistency, a reluctance to recognize the existence of mystery and to let God be wiser than men, and a consequent subjecting of Scripture to the supposed demands of human logic" (22). Divine sovereignty (God as King) and human responsibility before him (God as Judge) can both be equally true.

So what should we do with these seemingly irreconcilable, yet undeniable biblical principles? Packer answers, "Accept it for what it is, and learn to live with it . . . put down the semblance of contradiction to the deficiency of your own understanding; think of the two principles as not rival alternatives but, in some way that at present you do not grasp, complementary to each other" (26).

## **PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER**

A God that could be understood exhaustively would be a God in man's image. Divine sovereignty and human responsibility coexist, and we must affirm both truths from Scripture and let them guide and govern our lives (43). As Packer explains "God did not give us the reality of his rule in order to give us an excuse for neglecting his orders" (41).

Back to my opening question: If God is sovereign, then why do I share the gospel? Here's the answer: because God ordains salvation and God ordains the means of salvation, which glorifies him no matter the result. The One who saves is the same for all: God. And the means of salvation is the same for all: proclamation of the gospel message. God does the saving (Romans 9), and man does

the proclaiming (Romans 10). How unsearchable and inscrutable are the ways of God (Romans 11)!

I'm assured that God is sovereign, and this assurance gives me confidence that he'll work through evangelism, regardless of results, for we are "the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing" (2 Corinthians 2:15). What a glorious thought! No matter the apparent result of my evangelism (means), one definite result is that I am an aroma of Christ to God. He is pleased. He delights in the proclamation. He is glorified in it. He saves his people through it.

Packer further explains that evangelism is a message delivered, not an effect produced. Evangelism is simply preaching the gospel, irrespective of its effect on the hearer (49). It's a message about God, sin, and Christ; it's a summons to respond in faith and repentance. What should motivate us for this task? Primarily the love of God and concern for his glory—followed by love of man and concern for his welfare (82).

## A USEFUL DISCIPLING RESOURCE

Packer's *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* is considered a modern classic, and for good reason. This little book is brimming with pastoral insight and biblical reflection. As such, it has a number of pastoral uses.

*Read this book if you're timid in evangelism*

Perhaps you're slow to sow the seed of the gospel because you fear man. If that's you, Packer shows how divine sovereignty ought to make us bold and confident before men as well as humble before God and earnest in our prayer that that he would sovereignly save the lost.

*Read this book if you're anxious in evangelism*

The man in Mark 4:26–29 scatters seed on the ground and then

is able to go to sleep. He's not anxious over the seed, staying up all night wondering if it will grow. He's not trying to coax it to grow. The earth yields produce by itself; the sower's role was simply to scatter the seed.

Maybe you're scattering the seed of the gospel, but rather than scattering and sleeping, you're scattering and stressing. Packer unpacks how divine sovereignty undergirds evangelism and upholds the evangelist by "creating a hope of success that could not otherwise be entertained" (135).

*Read this book if you're slothful in evangelism*

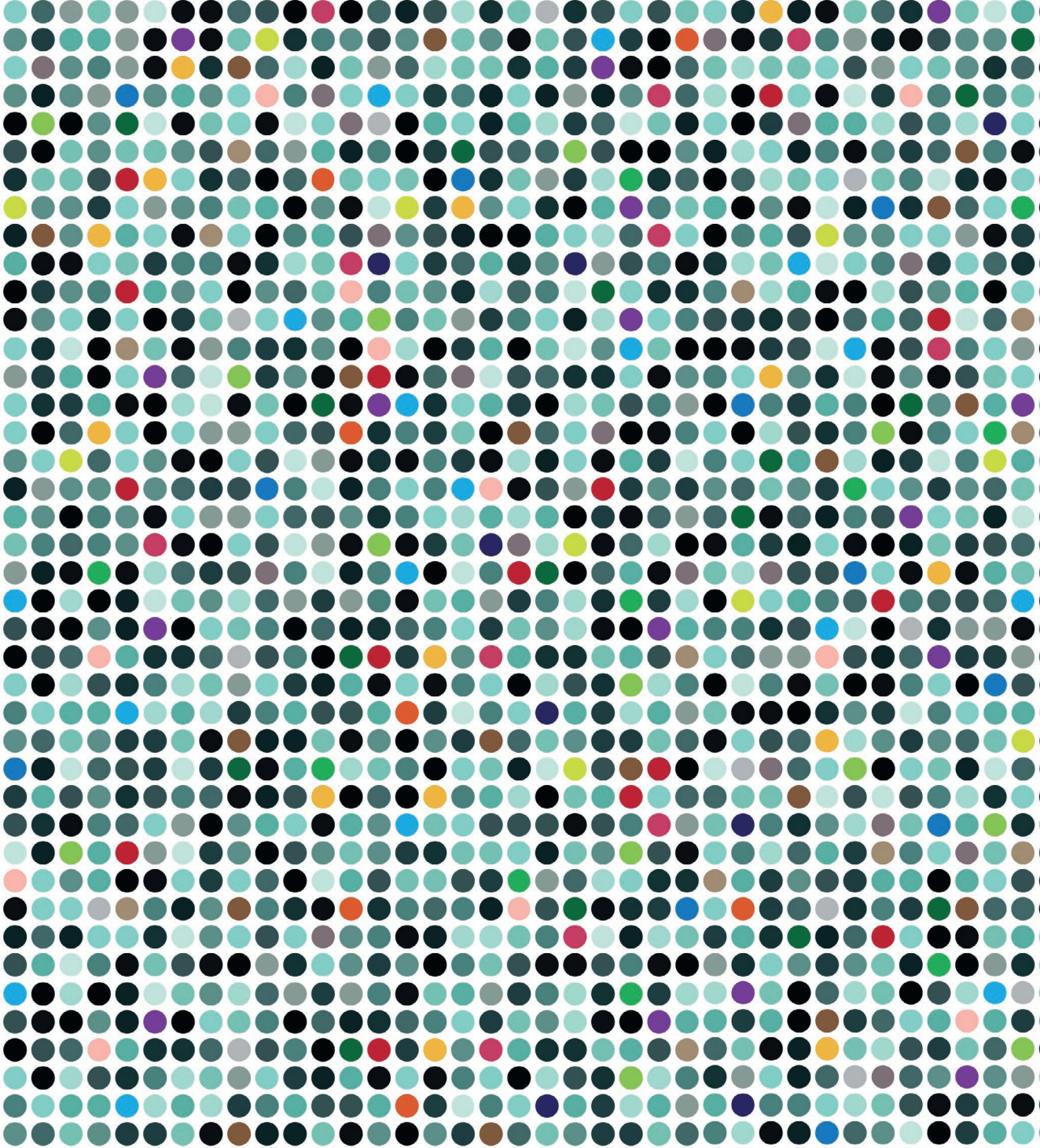
Packer's preaching and pastoral sensibilities can help you if you've become lazy in the joyful Christian duty of evangelism. For instance, Packer writes:

You are not on a fools' errand. You are not wasting either your time or theirs. You have no reason to be ashamed of your message, or half-hearted and apologetic in delivering it. You have every reason to be bold, and free, and natural, and hopeful of success. For God can give his truth an effectiveness that you and I cannot give it. God can make his truth triumphant to the conversion of the most seemingly hardened unbeliever. You and I will never write off anyone as hopeless and beyond the reach of God if we believe in the sovereignty of his grace (128).

For three years, I wrestled with how divine sovereignty and human responsibility could be reconciled. I feared that the absolute sovereignty of God might, in some way, undermine my faith. I feared that if God were *that* sovereign, then I'd lose my zeal and compassion for the lost.

This book would have been an enormous help to me in those years of theological searching. It's an accessible and unmatched introduction to the sovereignty of God that also energizes us to share the gospel. The simply explained truths of this book will ignite your desire to pursue the joyful Christian duty of evangelism.





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