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Essays on the “Traditional Statement” Part 2



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Editorial Introduction



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This issue is the second part of a series exploring the document penned by Mississippi pastor Eric Hankins titled “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation,” or simply the Traditional Statement (TS). These essays reflect a desire by certain Southern Baptists to provide a positive articulation for the non-Calvinist Baptist tradition which might be called the General Baptist or the Sandy Creek or the Mullins-Hobbs-Rogers tradition. An assumption that unifies all of the advocates of the TS is that any person who hears the gospel can be saved.

Steve Lemke, Provost and Professor of Philosophy and Ethics at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, demonstrates that the claims in Article 7 regarding God’s sovereignty and knowledge of future events are consistent with the freedom of individuals. In his essay on Article 8, Braxton Hunter, Evangelist with Trinity Crusades for Christ and visiting Professor of Philosophy and Apologetics at Trinity College of the Bible and Theological Seminary in Newburgh, Indiana, advocates for a model of soft-libertarian rather than compatibilist freedom. Steve Horn, Pastor of First Baptist Church, Lafayette, Louisiana, affirms eternal security as stated in Article 9 and distinguishes this view from perseverance of the saints. Preston Nix, the Roland Q. Leavell Professor of Evangelism and Director of the Leavell Center for Evangelism and Church Health at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, focuses his attention on the affirmation in Article 10 of the Great Commission. I address whether the TS is Semi-Pelagian. Steve Lemke identifies five models for understanding the various approaches to divine determinism, divine sovereignty, and human freedom. Nathan Finn, Associate Professor of Historical Theology and Baptist Studies at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, provides “friendly reflections” on the TS from a Calvinistic Southern Baptist perspective. To conclude the series, Rhyne Putman, Assistant Professor of Theology and Culture at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, explains why he, a non-Calvinist Southern Baptist, does not affirm the Traditional Statement.

I am thankful for the work of the eleven contributors to this two-part series, especially David Allen and Eric Hankins, who served with me as co-editors on this project. May God be glorified as we continue this discussion of God’s work of saving lowly sinners through the matchless person, work, and name of His Son, Jesus Christ.

A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation



Eric Hankins, Ph.D.

Eric Hankins is Pastor of First Baptist Church, Oxford, Mississippi. He is the primary author of "A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation."

Preamble

Every generation of Southern Baptists has the duty to articulate the truths of its faith with particular attention to the issues that are impacting contemporary mission and ministry. The precipitating issue for this statement is the rise of a movement called "New Calvinism" among Southern Baptists. This movement is committed to advancing in the churches an exclusively Calvinistic understanding of salvation, characterized by an aggressive insistence on the "Doctrines of Grace" ("TULIP"), and to the goal of making Calvinism the central Southern Baptist position on God's plan of salvation.

While Calvinists have been present in Southern Baptist life from its earliest days and have made very important contributions to our history and theology, the majority of Southern Baptists do not embrace Calvinism. Even the minority of Southern Baptists who have identified themselves as Calvinists generally modify its teachings in order to mitigate certain unacceptable conclusions (e.g., anti-missionism, hyper-Calvinism, double predestination, limited atonement, etc.). The very fact that there is a plurality of views on Calvinism designed to deal with these weaknesses (variously described as "3-point," "4-point," "moderate," etc.) would seem to call for circumspection and humility with respect to the system and to those who disagree with it. For the most part, Southern Baptists have been glad to relegate disagreements over Calvinism to secondary status along with other important but "non-essential" theological matters. The Southern Baptist majority has fellowshiped happily with its Calvinist brethren while kindly resisting Calvinism itself. And, to their credit, most Southern Baptist Calvinists have not demanded the adoption of their view as the standard. We would be fine if this consensus continued, but some New Calvinists seem to be pushing for a radical alteration of this long-standing arrangement.

We propose that what most Southern Baptists believe about salvation can rightly be called "Traditional" Southern Baptist soteriology, which should be understood in distinction to "Calvinist" soteriology. Traditional Southern Baptist soteriology is articulated in a general

way in the *Baptist Faith and Message*, “Article IV.” While some earlier Baptist confessions were shaped by Calvinism, the clear trajectory of the BF&M since 1925 is away from Calvinism. For almost a century, Southern Baptists have found that a sound, biblical soteriology can be taught, maintained, and defended without subscribing to Calvinism. Traditional Southern Baptist soteriology is grounded in the conviction that every person can and must be saved by a personal and free decision to respond to the Gospel by trusting in Christ Jesus alone as Savior and Lord. Without ascribing to Calvinism, Southern Baptists have reached around the world with the Gospel message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. Baptists have been well-served by a straightforward soteriology rooted in the fact that Christ is willing and able to save any and every sinner.

New Calvinism presents us with a duty and an opportunity to more carefully express what is generally believed by Southern Baptists about salvation. It is no longer helpful to identify ourselves by how many points of convergence we have with Calvinism. While we are not insisting that every Southern Baptist affirm the soteriological statement below in order to have a place in the Southern Baptist family, we are asserting that the vast majority of Southern Baptists are not Calvinists and that they do not want Calvinism to become the standard view in Southern Baptist life. We believe it is time to move beyond Calvinism as a reference point for Baptist soteriology.

Below is what we believe to be the essence of a “Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation.” We believe that most Southern Baptists, regardless of how they have described their personal understanding of the doctrine of salvation, will find the following statement consistent with what the Bible teaches and what Southern Baptists have generally believed about the nature of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Article One: The Gospel

We affirm that the Gospel is the good news that God has made a way of salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ for any person. This is in keeping with God’s desire for every person to be saved.

We deny that only a select few are capable of responding to the Gospel while the rest are predestined to an eternity in hell.

Genesis 3:15; Psalm 2:1–12; Ezekiel 18:23, 32; Luke 19:10; Luke 24:45–49; John 1:1–18; 3:16; Romans 1:1–6; 5:8; 8:34; 2 Corinthians 5:17–21; Galatians 4:4–7; Colossians 1:21–23; 1 Timothy 2:3–4; Hebrews 1:1–3; 4:14–16; 2 Peter 3:9

Article Two: The Sinfulness of Man

We affirm that, because of the fall of Adam, every person inherits a nature and environment inclined toward sin and that every person who is capable of moral action will sin. Each person's sin alone brings the wrath of a holy God, broken fellowship with Him, ever-worsening selfishness and destructiveness, death, and condemnation to an eternity in hell.

We deny that Adam's sin resulted in the incapacitation of any person's free will or rendered any person guilty before he has personally sinned. While no sinner is remotely capable of achieving salvation through his own effort, we deny that any sinner is saved apart from a free response to the Holy Spirit's drawing through the Gospel.

Genesis 3:15–24; 6:5; Deuteronomy 1:39; Isaiah 6:5; 7:15–16; 53:6; Jeremiah 17:5,9; 31:29–30; Ezekiel 18:19–20; Matthew 7:21–23; Romans 1:18–32; 3:9–18; 5:12; 6:23; 7:9; 1 Corinthians 1:18–25; 6:9–10; 15:22; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 9:27–28; Revelation 20:11–15

Article Three: The Atonement of Christ

We affirm that the penal substitution of Christ is the only available and effective sacrifice for the sins of every person.

We deny that this atonement results in salvation without a person's free response of repentance and faith. We deny that God imposes or withholds this atonement without respect to an act of the person's free will. We deny that Christ died only for the sins of those who will be saved.

Psalms 22:1–31; Isaiah 53:1–12; John 12:32, 14:6; Acts 10:39–43; Acts 16:30–32; Romans 3:21–26; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:10–14; Philippians 2:5–11; Colossians 1:13–20; 1 Timothy 2:5–6; Hebrews 9:12–15, 24–28; 10:1–18; 1 John 1:7; 2:2

Article Four: The Grace of God

We affirm that grace is God's generous decision to provide salvation for any person by taking all of the initiative in providing atonement, in freely offering the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in uniting the believer to Christ through the Holy Spirit by faith.

We deny that grace negates the necessity of a free response of faith or that it cannot be resisted. We deny that the response of faith is in any way a meritorious work that earns salvation.

Ezra 9:8; Proverbs 3:34; Zechariah 12:10; Matthew 19:16–30, 23:37; Luke 10:1–12; Acts 15:11; 20:24; Romans 3:24, 27–28; 5:6, 8, 15–21; Galatians 1:6; 2:21; 5; Ephesians 2:8–10; Philippians 3:2–9; Colossians 2:13–17; Hebrews 4:16; 9:28; 1 John 4:19

Article Five: The Regeneration of the Sinner

We affirm that any person who responds to the Gospel with repentance and faith is born again through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is a new creation in Christ and enters, at the moment he believes, into eternal life.

We deny that any person is regenerated prior to or apart from hearing and responding to the Gospel.

Luke 15:24; John 3:3; 7:37–39; 10:10; 16:7–14; Acts 2:37–39; Romans 6:4–11; 10:14; 1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20; 6:15; Colossians 2:13

Article Six: Election to Salvation

We affirm that, in reference to salvation, election speaks of God's eternal, gracious, and certain plan in Christ to have a people who are His by repentance and faith.

We deny that election means that, from eternity, God predestined certain people for salvation and others for condemnation.

Genesis 1:26–28; 12:1–3; Exodus 19:6; Jeremiah 31:31–33; Matthew 24:31; 25:34; John 6:70; 15:16; Romans 8:29–30, 33; 9:6–8; 11:7; 1 Corinthians 1:1–2; Ephesians 1:4–6; 2:11–22; 3:1–11; 4:4–13; 1 Timothy 2:3–4; 1 Peter 1:1–2; 1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 7:9–10

Article Seven: The Sovereignty of God

We affirm God's eternal knowledge of and sovereignty over every person's salvation or condemnation.

We deny that God's sovereignty and knowledge require Him to cause a person's acceptance or rejection of faith in Christ.

Genesis 1:1; 6:5–8; 18:16–33; 22; 2 Samuel 24:13–14; 1 Chronicles 29:10–20; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Joel 2:32; Psalm 23; 51:4; 139:1–6; Proverbs 15:3; John 6:44; Romans 11:3; Titus 3:3–7; James 1:13–15; Hebrews 11:6; 12:28; 1 Peter 1:17

Article Eight: The Free Will of Man

We affirm that God, as an expression of His sovereignty, endows each person with actual free will (the ability to choose between two options), which must be exercised in accepting or rejecting God's gracious call to salvation by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.

We deny that the decision of faith is an act of God rather than a response of the person. We deny that there is an “effectual call” for certain people that is different from a “general call” to any person who hears and understands the Gospel.

Genesis 1:26–28; Numbers 21:8–9; Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:15; 1 Samuel 8:1–22; 2 Samuel 24:13–14; Esther 3:12–14; Matthew 7:13–14; 11:20–24; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 9:23–24; 13:34; 15:17–20; Romans 10:9–10; Titus 2:12; Revelation 22:17

Article Nine: The Security of the Believer

We affirm that when a person responds in faith to the Gospel, God promises to complete the process of salvation in the believer into eternity. This process begins with justification, whereby the sinner is immediately acquitted of all sin and granted peace with God; continues in sanctification, whereby the saved are progressively conformed to the image of Christ by the indwelling Holy Spirit; and concludes in glorification, whereby the saint enjoys life with Christ in heaven forever.

We deny that this Holy Spirit-sealed relationship can ever be broken. We deny even the possibility of apostasy.

John 10:28–29; 14:1–4; 16:12–14; Philippians 1:6; Romans 3:21–26; 8:29,30; 35–39; 12:1–3; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Ephesians 1:13–14; Philippians 3:12; Colossians 1:21–22; 1 John 2:19; 3:2; 5:13–15; 2 Timothy 1:12; Hebrews 13:5; James 1:12; Jude 24–25

Article Ten: The Great Commission

We affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned His church to preach the good news of salvation to all people to the ends of the earth. We affirm that the proclamation of the Gospel is God’s means of bringing any person to salvation.

We deny that salvation is possible outside of a faith response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Psalms 51:13; Proverbs 11:30; Isaiah 52:7; Matthew 28:19–20; John 14:6; Acts 1:8; 4:12; 10:42–43; Romans 1:16, 10:13–15; 1 Corinthians 1:17–21; Ephesians 3:7–9; 6:19–20; Philippians 1:12–14; 1 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Timothy 2:5; 2 Timothy 4:1–5

Commentary on Article 7: The Sovereignty of God



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God's Omniscience and Exhaustive Foreknowledge

The first affirmation in Article 7 is of “God’s eternal knowledge” – an affirmation of God being all-knowing (omniscient), and of the fact that God knows all things from eternity, and thus from a human perspective of time He foreknows of all things (cf. Ps 139:1–10; Rom 8:29–30; 11:2; 16:27). *The Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM) 2000 strongly affirms God’s omniscience. The affirmation of God’s omniscience is strengthened in each of the succeeding versions of the BFM. Interestingly, the word “all-knowing” does not appear at all in the BFM 1925. The descriptor of

“all-wise” was added in the BFM 1963.¹ In the BFM 2000, however, multiple claims of God’s perfect knowledge are affirmed. Article 2 of the BFM 2000 twice describes God as “all powerful” and “all knowing,” and adds that “His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures.” It also repeats the description of God as “all wise” from the 1963 statement, and the affirmation that God is “infinite in holiness and all other perfections,” a phrase repeated in all three versions of the confession.²

Article Seven: The Sovereignty of God

We affirm God’s eternal knowledge of and sovereignty over every person’s salvation or condemnation.

We deny that God’s sovereignty and knowledge require Him to cause a person’s acceptance or rejection of faith in Christ.

*Genesis 1:1; 6:5–8; 18:16–33; 22;
2 Samuel 24:13–14; 1 Chronicles
29:10–20; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Joel
2:32; Psalm 23; 51:4; 139:1–6;
Proverbs 15:3; John 6:44; Romans
11:3; Titus 3:3–7; James 1:13–15;
Hebrews 11:6; 12:28; 1 Peter 1:17*

Why does the BFM 2000 add the double reference to God being all-knowing, and the statement that God’s “perfect knowledge extends to all things past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures”? Baptists and other evangelicals in 2000 were dealing with the movement known as “Freewill

¹BFM 1963, Article 2a (“God the Father”).

²BFM 2000, Article 2 (“God”) and 2a (“God the Father”).

Theism” or “Openness of God” theology. In this view, God does not have perfect foreknowledge. Although He knows all that is available to be known, it is impossible for Him to know “the future decisions of His free creatures.”

Traditional Baptists and most conservative evangelicals, however, reject the Openness of God view and hold a high view of God’s perfect knowledge and foreknowledge. God has perfect knowledge, including the “future decisions of His free creatures.”³ However, Traditional Baptists also reject the interpretation by many Reformed thinkers that foreknowledge actually means “foreloved” – that is, that God (fore)loved (only) those whom He elected. The election of these “foreloved” people was not premised upon any response on their part. It was an Unconditional Election imposed on them by Irresistible Grace. However, “foreloved” is clearly not what Scripture means when it speaks of those whom He “foreknew” (Rom 8:29). In any standard lexicon, the Greek word for foreknew (*proegnō*) simply means knowing something before it happens.⁴

Let us further examine several important implications of what this statement in the BFM 2000, that God foreknows the “future decisions of His free creatures.”

(a) *Human choices are “free,” not forced by deterministic decrees.* If persons did only what was decreed by God from before the beginning of time, humans would not be “His free creatures,” but would be under compulsion. One who has no choices is not free. The denial in Article 7 that God’s perfect knowledge of future human choices causes “a person’s acceptance or rejection of faith in Christ” is supportive of this concept of freedom.⁵

(b) *God can foreknow the future free choices of individuals.* This point is denied by Openness of God theologians, but is affirmed overwhelmingly by Baptists and other conservative evangelicals. God’s knowledge is not limited to past and present events, but extends into the future (Acts 2:23; Rom 8:29; 11:2; 1 Pet 1:2). God’s perfect knowledge and omniscience is a characteristic we would expect of anyone worthy of the name “God.” A god without omniscience and foreknowledge would simply not be God.

(c) *God can foreknow the future free choices of individuals without overriding their freedom.* Many Reformed theologians profess that God’s foreknowledge of the future essentially overrides any meaningful human freedom. They argue that if God foreknows what a person will decide, and God’s foreknowledge is perfect, then the person cannot decide differently than God believes

³For more about how the BFM 2000 is responding to Openness of God theology, see Douglas K. Blount, “Article II: God,” in *Baptist Faith and Message 2000: Critical Issues in America’s Largest Protestant Denomination*, ed. Douglas K. Blount and Joseph D. Wooddell (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 14–17.

⁴*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. s.v. “*proginosko, prognosis*.”

⁵For more on the problem of reconciling determinism with human freedom, see Jeremy A. Evans, “Reflections on Determinism and Human Freedom,” in *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, ed. Allen and Lemke (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 253–74.

they will choose. This logic is flawed in at least three ways.

(1) Saying that God's foreknowledge takes away any real human choices *fundamentally misunderstands God's relation to time*. God is not bound by time; He exists in eternity. It is impossible for us time-bound humans to understand fully what it means to live in eternity. There is mystery here. However, we can be sure that God's relationship to time is different than it is for us humans. Whereas from a human perspective the distinction between the past, present, and future have immense significance, God lives in the "eternal now" in which everything is the present.⁶ So, although His *foreknowledge* is before the present in *human* time, God experiences it in something like our experience of the present. God is outside of human time, so His knowledge is not subject to the normal limitations of time.

(2) Saying that God's foreknowledge takes away any real human choices *fundamentally confuses the difference between knowledge and causation*. Two plus two is not four because I know it; it is true because it is true in reality. In fact, two plus two equals four whether I believe it or not. Knowing something does not cause it to happen. Again, the misconception that God's foreknowledge of future human choices *causes* "a person's acceptance or rejection of faith in Christ" is denied in Article 7 of the TS.

(3) Saying that God's foreknowledge takes away any real human choices *fundamentally confuses necessity* (what *must* happen) and *certainty* (what *will* happen). There is an immense difference between necessity and certainty. Since God's knowledge does not *cause* future events, His (fore)knowledge does not make these events *necessary*. Future events are contingent on the "future decisions of His free creatures."⁷

Human analogies break down here, because we are bound by time and imperfect knowledge, while God is not bound by these limitations. However, ponder this analogy. Imagine that John has listened to the end of a football game in which his team makes a remarkable comeback at the end of the game to win the contest. He is watching a replay of the game with his friend Bill who does *not* know the outcome of the game (or that John knows its outcome). As their team is behind throughout most of the game, Bill laments that their team is going to lose the game, but John keeps telling Bill that he believes they can come back and win. John encourages Bill to have faith in their team. Sure enough, as John knew they would, the football team comes back and wins a dramatic victory at the end of the game. Bill is amazed that John had such confidence that their team would come back and win the

⁶For a fuller discussion of God existing in the "Eternal Now," and its implications for Conditional Election and salvation, see Richard Land, "Congruent Election: Understanding Salvation from an 'Eternal Now' Perspective," in *Whosoever Will*, 45–59.

⁷For more on the confusion of contingency and necessity, see Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 8–9, 31–38; and Robert E. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), 36–63.

game. In truth, of course, John did not really have “faith” – he had knowledge of what would actually happen that was inaccessible to Bill. The main point is this – John’s knowledge of what would happen at the end of the game had exactly *nothing* to do with his team winning the game. His knowledge did not predetermine the blocking of the line, the throws of the quarterback, or the catches of the receiver. John knew the result with *certainty*, but not of *logical necessity*. He simply knew ahead of time what would actually happen without causing what happened. Likewise, God knows our future choices with certainty without making them logically necessary.

Applied to salvation, Traditional Baptists believe that God elects and predestines those whom He foreknows will respond to the proclamation of the gospel through the conviction of the Holy Spirit with repentance and faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. This pattern is stated nowhere more clearly than in Rom 8:29–30, which serves as a prologue to Romans 9–11:

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Rom 8:29–30, NASB)

Note that predestination, calling, and justification are conditional upon God’s foreknowledge of those who would be led by the Holy Spirit to respond to the gospel with repentance and faith. God does not first decree or predestine those who are elect and then foreknow those who would be saved based upon His decree. Rather, God’s foreknowledge of human responses comes first, with God’s election, calling, and justification flowing from His foreknowledge. Romans 11:1–2 likewise affirms this pattern of divine foreknowledge of foreseen faith preceding election and justification:

I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. (Rom 11:1–2, NASB)

Just who are these people whom God foreknew? Scholars debate whether Paul is referring here (a) to the election of Israel to salvation or (b) to their election as a people as God’s instrument or vehicle for salvation to all peoples. Assuming that the Apostle is addressing the salvation of Israel, he makes it clear that it is not merely physical Israel to whom he is referring:

(T)hey are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. (Rom 9:6–8, NKJV)

So who is Israel, if not physical Israel in the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? The Apostle makes it very clear in Romans 9–11 such that anyone who has ears to hear can understand – true Israel whom

God will save consists of whosoever will come to Him by faith, as the following verses make clear:

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” (Rom 9:30–33, NASB)

But what does it say? “THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, in your mouth and in your heart” -- that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, “WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek ; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for “WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.” (Rom 10:8–13, NASB)

To summarize, then, Traditional Baptists believe the Bible teaches that God is omniscient with exhaustive foreknowledge of the future, including not only all future events but also all possible events. Salvation (including election and predestination) is based upon God’s foreknowledge of the repentance and faith of believers in response to the impulse of the Holy Spirit. God’s foreknowledge secures rather than denies genuine human freedom. God’s election is based on Him foreseeing “the future decisions of His free creatures” to respond in repentance and faith to the proclamation of the gospel.

God’s Omnipotence and Sovereignty

The second affirmation in Article 7 voices an exalted view of God’s sovereignty. The sovereignty of God is one of the most basic truths of Scripture, affirmed in multiple texts in the Bible. God revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *El Shaddai*, or “God Almighty” (Gen 17:1, 35:11, Ex 6:3).⁸ The New Testament Greek word often used to describe God’s omnipotence is *pantokratos* (or the related *pantokrator*). This is a compound word combining *kratos* (to do) with *panta* (all), so its meaning is to be all powerful or almighty.⁹ It is often translated as the “Lord Almighty” (2 Cor 6:18; Rev 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22). In the King James Version, Rev 19:6 reads “the Lord God omnipotent reigneth,” a phrase made popularized even more by its repetition in the “Hallelujah Chorus” of Handel’s *Messiah*. God’s sovereignty is also affirmed by the repeated use of the motif of God (and Jesus) as King who reigns over the Kingdom of God (especially in the Gospel of Matthew).

⁸R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., s.v. *Shaddai* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:907.

⁹Kittel, *TDNT*, 3:914–5.

Somewhat surprisingly, the BFM 2000 does not use the words “sovereign” or “sovereignty” either in the article on God or the article on God the Father. However, these words do appear in two other places. In Article 5 on “God’s Purpose of God,” God’s gracious election is described as a “glorious display of God’s sovereign goodness,” and in Article 9 on “The Kingdom,” which affirms that “The Kingdom of God includes both His general sovereignty over the universe and His particular kingship over men who willfully acknowledge Him as King.” Furthermore, the notion of God’s kingly rule is affirmed in the BFM. Article 2 describes God as the “Ruler of the Universe,” and that “God the Father reigns with providential care over His universe.” The *Baptist Faith and Message* does, then, affirm a high view of divine sovereignty.

Theologians sometimes quibble over the definition of God’s omnipotence, dealing with hypothetical issues that bring little (if any) light to this doctrine. Some ancient philosophers asked, for example, if God could create a rock so heavy that He could not lift it, or if He could create such a rock but could not lift it (and thus, again, that He is not fully omnipotent). The seeming paradox is that if He could not create such an unliftable rock then He cannot do everything (and thus is not fully omnipotent) or, if He could create such a rock but could not lift it (again suggesting that He is not fully omnipotent). Another such mental puzzle is whether God could create a square triangle. Again, the point of these illustrations is to suggest that there are some things that are conceptually impossible, that even God cannot do. The problem with such definitions is equating “omnipotence” with God having the power to do everything and anything, even things that are conceptually impossible. God’s “inability” to create an unliftable rock is a pseudo-inability; there is no finite object such as a rock which is above His ability to move, because He is omnipotent. The question posed by this puzzle is a false dilemma. Likewise, making square triangles is impossible not because God lacks some ability, but because it is conceptually impossible. A square triangle simply no longer fits the definition of a triangle.

However, because (like most Traditional Baptists) I have such a high view of the sovereignty of God, for me personally, I am extremely reluctant to say that there is anything that God cannot do. There are things that God will not do because they are not consistent with His character or His will, but this does not indicate any inability or deficiency on His part. He simply has no interest in doing such things. Jesus asserted that things that seem impossible to humans are possible for God (Matt 17:20; 19:26; Mark 10:27). The angel speaking to Mary (discussing the miraculous nature of the Virgin Birth) stated that “with God nothing will be impossible” (Luke 1:37, NKJV). Likewise, Jesus affirmed (discussing the miraculous nature of salvation) that “with God all things are possible” (Matt 19:26 and Mark 10:27, NKJV). So I am reluctant to say even that God could not change the laws of our universe or create a new universe in which triangles could be squares, but I doubt that He will because doing so merely to prove His ability would be out of character for God. Jesus resisted the temptations of Satan to exert His powers by turning stones into bread, or having angels catch Him after He jumped off the pinnacle of the temple (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). God exerts His remarkable powers for His own redemptive purposes, not to impress humans.

The fact that God *can* do anything, thus, does not demand that He *must* do anything and everything to be God. In fact, if God is truly sovereign, He cannot be forced to do anything He does not will to do. To be sovereign means to be in control, not to be under the control of others. The most important issue, then, is not what might God *possibly* could do, or what *we think He should do*; it is what He *has done, is doing, and will do*. Reformed theologians and Traditional Baptists, then, do not differ essentially in affirming the sovereignty of God. They both affirm a high view of divine sovereignty and omnipotence. The difference between them is not *that* God is sovereign, but *how* He exercises His sovereignty.

God's General Sovereignty

God's sovereignty may be discussed in at least two ways. First of all, there is God's *general sovereignty* over His creation. God is the Creator and Sustainer of the world through His providential care. As the BFM 2000 affirms, one way that God reigns in His Kingdom is "His general sovereignty over the universe."¹⁰ How does our omnipotent God exercise His sovereignty over creation?

It is important to distinguish between God's *omnipotence* and *sovereignty*. God's omnipotence concerns what He *could* do; God's sovereignty concerns what He *will*s to do. That God *can* do anything does not demand that He *must* do anything. God is free in His sovereignty to act as He sees fit. Note that Article 7 defends God's freedom and sovereignty by denying that He is *required* to act in a particular way.

Many Reformed theologians believe in what they call God's "*meticulous providence*." Meticulous providence is the belief that God controls and causes every detail in the universe. John Calvin taught that "not one drop of rain falls without God's sure command,"¹¹ and that "God by His secret bridle so holds and governs (persons) that they cannot move even one of their fingers without accomplishing the work of God much more than their own."¹² In essence, every detail in human life is caused directly by God. For example, Paul Helm claims that "God controls all persons and events equally" because "God could hardly exercise care over them without having control over it."¹³ The *Westminster Confession of Faith* asserts that God in His providence "doth direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least."¹⁴

¹⁰BFM 2000, Article 9 ("The Kingdom").

¹¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (LCC 20, 21; London: SCM Press, 1960), I.16.4–5. Calvin similarly asserts God's meticulous providence in matters such as which mothers have milk and others do not (*Institutes*, I.16.3).

¹²John Calvin, *A Defence of the Secret Providence of God, by Which He Executes His Eternal Decrees*, trans. Henry Cole (London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1927), 238.

¹³Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, Contours of Christian Theology series, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 20–21; cf., John Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," 17–60; Helseth, "God Causes All Things," 25–77.

¹⁴*Westminster Confession of Faith*, Art. 5, sect. 1, "On Providence," cited in Archibald Alexander Hodge,

Paul Kjos Helseth describes God's role in providence as "omnicausality" – He literally causes all things.¹⁵ B. B. Warfield makes this claim even more explicit: "There is nothing that is, and nothing that comes to pass, that [God] has not first decreed and then brought to pass by His creation or providence."¹⁶ Meticulous providence, then, reduces to *theological determinism* – the view that God predetermines all events from the beginning of time, and thus human actions are only playing out an inviolable script which God wrote before time began.

Calvinistic thinkers suggest that if God does not have this level of control, then He is not really sovereign. This belief places the Reformed thinker in an unhappy dilemma. On the one hand, if God causes all things then that obviously makes God the author of evil. Although many Reformed thinkers try to avoid this consequence, it is unavoidable. If God controls and causes every single detail, then evil is the result of his actions. It is contradictory to say that God causes everything and yet does not cause some (evil) things. However, if, on the other hand, Reformed thinkers deny that God causes evil, they cannot then affirm that He controls all things. They cannot have it both ways.¹⁷

In trying to avoid this obvious dilemma, at times some leading Calvinists seem to be using words in confusing, misleading, or disingenuous ways. For example, some Reformed thinkers use language such as "concurrence" or divine "permission," such that human agents take the blame for evil rather than God. Most evangelicals would agree with this apparently more moderate way of describing God's providence – a way that seems open to God allowing human participation in decisions through His divine "permission," and for human "concurrence" in bringing about events. However, more careful investigation reveals that Calvinists do not mean by these words what they appear to mean. For example, regarding divine permission, John Frame insists that God does not permit anything passively, but instead His permission is "an *efficacious* permission"¹⁸ – that is, God causes everything and the "permission" is essentially an illusion. In a similar discussion, while Francis Turretin acknowledges that Calvinist theologians utilize the word "permission," he insists that this word is not intended "in the Pelagian sense of otiose 'permission' which takes away his own right and sets up the idol of free will in its place."¹⁹ Likewise, while "concurrence" seems to suggest human participation in determining events, this is not what some Calvinists appear to mean by this label. Herman Bavinck asserts that "the primary (cause) works through the secondary (causes)," such that "the secondary causes can be

A Commentary on the Confession (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1869), 129.

¹⁵Helseth, "God Causes All Things," 37–43.

¹⁶B. B. Warfield, "Predestination," in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 2, *Biblical Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991 reprint ed.), 21.

¹⁷For more on problem of evil in regard to Reformed theology, see Bruce A. Little, "Evil and God's Sovereignty," in *Whosoever Will*, 275–98.

¹⁸John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 178.

¹⁹Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George M. Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992–1997), 1:516–7.

compared to instruments.”²⁰ There is no genuine concurrence, then, between God and humans; humans are merely tools whom God uses. Similarly, Wayne Grudem understands “concurrence” to mean that God compels humans “to cause them to act as they do.”²¹ Despite these somewhat misleading terms such as divine “permission” and His “concurrence” with humans, in fact only God causes and directs all things. Humans are not free to change or adjust even a single detail in the universe, since God alone is the “free determiner of all that comes to pass in the world.”²²

Traditional Baptists believe that God is completely sovereign over all creation, but we differ with how He *exercises* that sovereignty. We believe that nothing in the universe is ever beyond His control. He can intervene in the course of history and in our personal lives whenever He desires. However, God often chooses to allow human decisions to be meaningful and for the natural consequences of actions to happen. He normally allows the world to run according to the laws of nature. Whenever we read or hear claims that God “ordains all things,”²³ “causes all things,”²⁴ or “controls all things,”²⁵ the logical consequence is that God is portrayed as the author of evil, because evil things are a significant part of “all things.”²⁶ Perhaps saying that God “directs all things,” God “knows all things,”²⁷ or that “nothing is outside of God’s ultimate control” are more fruitful and precise ways of describing how God exercises His general sovereignty. God “directing all things” affirms that He is over the entire universe and nothing is outside His control, but it does not portray Him as a micromanaging God who must directly ordain or cause every detail of human life, including human choices. However, allowing human freedom to be meaningful in no way can frustrate God’s will. God’s will shall be done and His kingdom shall come regardless of human decisions or mistakes (Matt. 6:10). God is moving history toward its consummation in the return of Christ, ushering in the victorious Kingdom of God.

God’s Sovereignty in Salvation

A second aspect of God’s sovereignty regards the salvation of persons. This soteriological aspect of divine sovereignty is the primary focus of Article 7, for it affirms God’s “sovereignty over every person’s salvation or condemnation.” The denial made in Article 7 is that “God’s sovereignty and knowledge require Him to cause a person’s acceptance or rejection of faith in Christ.”

²⁰Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., vol. 2, *God and Creation*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 2:614–5.

²¹Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 142.

²²Warfield, “Predestination,” 8.

²³Feinberg, “God Ordains All Things,” 17–60.

²⁴Helseth, “God Causes All Things,” 25–77.

²⁵Bode Ososami, *The Majesty of God* (Central Milton Keynes: AuthorHouse, 2010), 120–1.

²⁶William Lane Craig, “God Directs All Things,” in *Four Views of Divine Providence*, 79–139.

²⁷Norman Geisler, “God Knows All Things,” in *Predestination and Free Will*, 61–98.

Traditional Baptists affirm a high view of divine sovereignty in salvation. *No one* is saved *apart from* or *contrary to* God's sovereignty. The BFM 2000 affirms that divine election, reflected through regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification, demonstrates a "glorious display of God's sovereign goodness."²⁸ Again, the question is not *whether* God is sovereign over salvation, but *how* He exercises His sovereignty over salvation. God can sovereignly determine whatever requirements for salvation He demands of humans.

What conditions *does* God in fact place on humans for salvation? As we have already seen in the discussion of Romans 9–11, the elect are not simply a select group of people chosen by God arbitrarily. In fact, election is reserved for those who come to God through *faith*, such that "whosoever will" may come to salvation (Rom 9:30–33; 10:8–13). Many other Scriptures identify faith as a necessary condition for salvation. For example, in the prologue to the Gospel of John: "He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even to those who believe in His name*" (John 1:11–12, NASB). Indeed, neither election nor predestination is mentioned a single time in Scripture when someone asks how to be saved. Instead, consistently in Scripture, persons who ask how to be saved are called upon to repent of sin and believe in Christ (Acts 2:37–40; 8:27–39; 16:30–31).

The BFM 2000 underscores this requirement that God sovereignly places on individuals for salvation. The Kingdom of God involves "His particular kingship over men who *willfully acknowledge* Him as King. Particularly the Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which *men enter by trustful, childlike commitment* to Jesus Christ."²⁹ Divine election is "consistent with the *free agency* of man,"³⁰ and salvation is "*offered freely to all who accept* Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord"³¹ Clearly, then, God has determined that election is not truly unconditional, but is conditional on persons responding to the conviction of the Holy Spirit with repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Reformed theologians may not agree with the denial in Article 7 that "God's sovereignty and knowledge require Him to cause a person's acceptance or rejection of faith in Christ." They view salvation as *monergism* – that is, a work done entirely by God. Traditional Baptists agree with monergism to some degree – that only God can save us, and we cannot save ourselves (Eph 2:8–10). There is nothing we could possibly do that would earn or deserve salvation. But Traditional Baptists disagree with Reformed thinkers about how God has sovereignly chosen to actualize salvation. Calvinistic thinkers believe all people are characterized by *total depravity*, understood as the *total inability* of anyone to respond to God. We are spiritually dead, and therefore unable to seek or respond to God. However, for His own secret reasons, God chose and predestined

²⁸ BFM 2000, Article 5 ("God's Purpose of Grace").

²⁹ BFM 2000, Article 9 ("The Kingdom").

³⁰ BFM 2000, Article 5 ("God's Purpose of Grace").

³¹ BFM 2000, Article 4 ("Salvation").

a small group of people to be His elect from before the foundation of the world. This group is predestined by God's *unconditional election* – it is absolutely unconditional on anything that we do. God compels the elect to believe by imposing *irresistible grace* on them to regenerate them.³² The order of salvation is reversed such that believers are regenerated and then believe, rather than believe and then experience being born again.

Article 7 in the statement on salvation rejects the notion that “God’s sovereignty and knowledge require Him to *cause* a person’s acceptance or rejection of faith in Christ,” and thus rejects unconditional election and irresistible grace. The Bible clearly and repeatedly states that persons can resist salvation and God’s will for their lives (for example, see Matt 27:37; Luke 7:30; 13:34; Acts 7:51; 26:14). Traditional Baptists also disagree with the claim that salvation is given us without any response required from us. God has sovereignly established the criteria that are essential for salvation. What necessary requirements has God sovereignly established for salvation? The Bible makes it abundantly clear that God requires *repentance and faith* for salvation. Every formulaic statement of what is required for salvation makes the necessity of repentance and faith for salvation crystal clear (Matt 10:32–33; Mark 16:15–16; John 3:14–17; 6:40; 11:26; 12:46; Acts 2:21, 27–30; 10:43; 16:30–31; Rom 9:33; 10:9–11; 1 John 5:1). Again, the question is not what God *could* or *might* have done, but what He *has* done. Therefore, *if we truly believe in the sovereignty of God*, we must be obedient to the criteria He has established for salvation. God does foreknow, elect, and predestine a particular type of person from before the foundation of the world – and that is *believers*! Based upon His foreknowledge of those who will (under the conviction of the Holy Spirit) repent of their sins and trust Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, God elects, predestines, justifies, and glorifies (Rom 8:29–30).

God desires the salvation of not just a chosen few, but of anyone and everyone in the world who responds to Him in faith (Matt 10:32–33; 18:14; John 1:7; 3:16–17; Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9; 1 John 2:2; Rev. 22:17). He sovereignly and graciously elects and predestines all those who believe. Of course, our seeking, desiring, or responding to God’s invitation of salvation does absolutely nothing to earn or deserve our salvation, any more than Naaman washing himself in the Jordan River seven times healed his leprosy (2 Kings 5:1–14). Naaman’s washing himself in the river just made him wet; it had no curative qualities. It was entirely God who healed him. But had Naaman not been obedient to meet God’s conditions by washing himself, God undoubtedly would not have healed Naaman. Likewise, there is nothing we could do to earn or merit our salvation. Only God can save us from our sin. However, God will not save an unrepentant sinner, and He will not save one who refuses to trust Christ as Savior and Lord. Unless we meet God’s conditions of repentance and faith, God will not save us.

Salvation is of God. He could have placed any conditions He wanted on salvation. He could have chosen to elect people without their assent. He could have required that they sell all their

³² For a more thorough critique of irresistible grace, see Steve Lemke, “A Biblical and Theological Critique of Irresistible Grace,” in *Whosoever Will*, 109–62.

possessions and submit to torture as a condition for salvation. The question is not what God *could have* done, but what He *has* done – the actual criteria He has established for salvation. The Bible affirms, and the denial in Article 7 of “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation” asserts, that God has sovereignly chosen to require repentance for sin and faith in Christ of any who would be saved, through the power of the Spirit of God. So we must teach, and so we must believe.

Commentary on Article 8: The Free Will of Man



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Introduction

Article 8 focuses on what the TS means by the term “free will” because one’s view of free will determines one’s view of soteriology. Since Traditionalists believe that anyone can be

Article Eight: The Free Will of Man

We affirm that God, as an expression of His sovereignty, endows each person with actual free will (the ability to choose between two options), which must be exercised in accepting or rejecting God’s gracious call to salvation by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.

We deny that the decision of faith is an act of God rather than a response of the person. We deny that there is an “effectual call” for certain people that is different from a “general call” to any person who hears and understands the Gospel.

Genesis 1:26–28; Numbers 21:8–9; Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:15; 1 Samuel 8:1–22; 2 Samuel 24:13–14; Esther 3:12–14; Matthew 7:13–14; 11:20–24; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 9:23–24; 13:34; 15:17–20; Romans 10:9–10; Titus 2:12; Revelation 22:17

saved, then anyone must be able to respond freely for or against the offer of the gospel. It is not uncommon for laymen and theologians alike to misunderstand the terminology and philosophical implications of free will. This chapter will attempt to bring some simplicity and clarity to this issue. Affirming the reality of a robust view of free will in no way jeopardizes an equally robust view of God’s sovereignty. As Article 8 notes, a view of free will that accords to human beings the ability to accept or reject the gospel is actually an expression of God’s sovereign purposes for His creation. The charge that Traditionalists deny, limit, or reduce the sovereignty of God has been answered in previous chapters. Indeed, if the intention of Article 8’s affirmation is properly understood, the charge will be completely laid to rest.

The Calvinist and Traditionalist Understandings of Free Will

Chapters on previous articles have briefly addressed the question of what free will actually is. Here, we will flesh it out in greater detail. Typically, Calvinists hold to what philosophers

refer to as “compatibilism.” On the compatibilist view, man is free to *do* whatever he wants, but not free to *want* whatever he wants. That is to say, man has freedom to exercise his will in accordance with his desires, but he has no control over those desires. Since man cannot manipulate those desires, and man is not naturally inclined toward God, the compatibilist maintains that man will never freely respond to God on his own. If he responds to God, it will be because his desires have been acted upon by God such that his “decisions” will follow from those desires. So long as a man’s actual decisions are not directly determined (only his desires) he is said to be free. In response to Article 8 of the TS, Tom Ascol explains,

This is exactly what we do in evangelism. We call spiritually dead people to come to life. We call on those who do not have spiritual ability to repent and trust Christ. As we preach the gospel, we know that the Word of the Lord must be accompanied by the power of the Lord or no one will be saved. When God graciously does this saving work, it is not a vitiation of man’s will. It is a gift of resurrection.¹

Without a careful eye, one is likely to miss Ascol’s point. God coerces man’s desires so that man’s will is now inclined toward God.

What is troubling for Traditionalists is that there is no difference between compatibilism and determinism. On determinism, most common among philosophical naturalists, free will is illusory. One may experience the various events and actions of his life as though they represent genuine choices; however, this is a byproduct of living in a closed system of cause-and-effect. No choice of any kind actually exists. Reconsidering compatibilism with this knowledge in mind, we must conclude that to say man is free to do what he wants, but not free to want what he wants, is to say that man is not genuinely free to make undetermined choices. It is for precisely this reason that compatibilism is often referred to as “soft-determinism.” On these grounds, William Lane Craig asserts,

Determinists reconcile universal, divine, causal determinism with human freedom by re-interpreting freedom in compatibilist terms. Compatibilism entails determinism, so there’s no mystery here. The problem is that adopting compatibilism achieves reconciliation only at the expense of denying what various Scriptural texts seem clearly to affirm: genuine indeterminacy and contingency.²

Since Scripture so frequently gives the impression that man is not only free, but responsible, it seems to support some version of libertarian freedom. If this were not the case, then a number of biblical passages (such as those documented in the statement) become awkward. If man is bound

¹Tom Ascol, “Response to A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation, Part 11,” <http://tomascoll.rocketrepubli.info/response-to-a-statement-of-the-traditional-southern-baptist-understanding-of-gods-plan-of-salvation-part-11/> (accessed December 24, 2012).

²William Lane Craig, “Molinism vs. Calvinism,” <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/molism-vs-calvinism> (accessed June 11, 2012).

by his will to only choose according to his sinful desires, then he simply cannot choose godliness. Worse still, he is punished for choosing *A* rather than *C* when, in fact, only *A*, *B*, and *D* were available to him. Such a proposal seems absurd. One might retort that this is precisely the beauty of Calvinism. God breaks in and draws the lost individual out of the bondage of his will and into a grace that is, quite literally, irresistible. This does not resolve the problem. Realizing such an existential transformation would be, indeed, a cause for exuberance for the most appreciative new believer. Grace would render him undeniably grateful. Nevertheless, placing the emphasis on the glorious salvation of the convert does not answer, but sidesteps the conundrum. When one considers the future citizen of hell, the difficulty emerges. On such a view, God is found punishing, and in some cases angry with, individuals for choosing wrongly among a set of all wrong options. This is one of several reasons most Southern Baptists find compatibilism to be an unsatisfactory theological explanation of the nature of reality.

Traditionalists typically hold to some form of libertarian free will. According to this model, man has, as a special gift from God, the ability to transcend cause and effect and actually make real decisions. These decisions may be influenced by outside factors, but not to the point of coercion.³ Libertarian free will is consistent with the language of Article 8 in the phrase “actual free will (the ability to choose between two options).” However, it is not our position that man can freely ascend to God without the offer and work of “the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.” The view that man can freely act without the in-working of God or can make the first move toward God can be understood as “hard-libertarianism.” This is the view of the will accepted by Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism but is explicitly rejected by the TS. Rather, the offer of the gospel and work of the Holy Spirit is available to anyone and is necessary for salvation. The denial “that the decision of faith is an act of God rather than a response of the person,” means that, although God is responsible for the salvific work and offer, man is responsible for receiving or rejecting the gift. This view is known as “soft-libertarianism.”

Soft-libertarianism is not only consistent with Scripture but seems to be suggested by it directly. In his article, “When a Christian Sins,” Paul Himes argues that in 1 Cor 10:13 only a soft-libertarian free will comes into view. In this passage, the Apostle Paul explains, “No temptation has overtaken you but such is common to man: and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” After making a powerful case on several fronts, Himes claims,

Under the compatibilist view, then, at situation (x), faced with temptation (y), agent (w) cannot *desire* to choose not to sin, for his desire is already determined by his value scale, which is already determined by factors out of his control. If (w) cannot *desire* to choose not to sin, then he is not

³This definition of libertarian free will is Christian-specific. By this I mean that a secular philosopher might not refer to God in a similar definition. In defining the libertarian position, I have focused the context on the issue at hand.

able to choose not to sin, hence he is unable to endure temptation. Thus, for the compatibilist, “in situation (x), faced with temptation (y), (w) cannot endure” (and “could not have endured”). Thus compatibilism has not adequately explained 1 Cor 10:13...⁴

The Problems with Compatibilism

The Questionable Status of Scriptural Support

Indeed, the proof-texts typically offered as evidence of compatibilism hardly suffice upon close examination. Ephesians 1:11 states, “In Him we were also made His inheritance, predestined according to the purpose of the One who works out everything in agreement with the decision of His will.” Traditionalists certainly agree that God “works out everything in agreement with the decision of his will.” What the passage does not say is precisely how this predestination occurs. Is it with respect to conformity to the image of God’s Son? Is it those who God knows will be saved? Is it with respect to the church in general, in other words, corporate election? Is this predestination as the Molinist understands it? Each of these is a possible understanding of predestination held by Southern Baptists. As Malcom Yarnell points out, “Southern Baptists affirm diverse understandings of divine election.”⁵ The goal of the TS is not to speak authoritatively for all Traditionalists on all texts. The point is that there is no good textual reason to favor a compatibilist view of this passage. Thus, this verse makes a poor proof-text in that it hardly necessitates compatibilism.⁶

John 8:34 declares, “Jesus responded, ‘I assure you: Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.’” Much has been made of this imagery. However, the man in prison shackles may still see the authorities through the bars and beg for mercy. All people experience the addicting power of sin in this world. Yet, to say that man *cannot* cry out in repentance without the *irresistible* enabling of God is going beyond the text and into eisegesis. In context, Jesus spoke these words in response to the Jews who were claiming that they were not enslaved by any other earthly authority. Jesus was demonstrating that we are still plagued with sin, in that our unsanctified, not-yet-glorified flesh is inclined toward it. Understood in this way, without all the theological baggage, the passage merely affirms the impact sin has on humanity. Therefore, our Lord utters a propositional truth claim which should be uncontroversial to Calvinists and Traditionalists.

⁴Paul A. Himes, “When a Christian Sins: 1 Corinthians 10:13 and the Power of Contrary Choice, in Relation to the Compatibilist-Libertarian Debate,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54 (June 2011): 342.

⁵Malcom Yarnell, “The TULIP of Calvinism in Light of History and the Baptist Faith and Message,” <http://sbctoday.com/2012/06/11/the-tulip-of-calvinism-in-light-of-history-and-the-baptist-faith-and-message/> (accessed August 30, 2012).

⁶In order to serve as a fitting proof text for compatibilism, the compatibilist interpretation would need to have greater plausibility. By plausibility I mean that it would need to be more likely the case than not. Yet, there is no *prima facie* reason to assign greater plausibility to such an interpretation.

In John 6:44, Jesus explains, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day.” This verse raises the ongoing debates regarding limited atonement and irresistible grace. Traditionalists maintain that everyone who hears the gospel can be saved. Salvation is not limited to a chosen few. Moreover, it may even be the case, in context, that when Jesus goes on to say, “Everyone who has listened to and learned from the Father comes to Me,” that he is referring to the God-fearing Jews who were open to God’s message through Jesus and became some of his earthly disciples. Unfortunately, viewed through Calvinistic lenses, this passage is understood to teach that the Father manipulates the desires of man and draws him to the point of salvation. Emboldened by this concept, sympathetic scholars often argue that on the basis of the original language, the term translated “draws” should be understood in a more robust way. Dragging the sinner, as if in a net from which he cannot escape, God literally coerces his natural desire and instantiates Christian belief.⁷ Briefly, three difficulties materialize which warrant consideration. First, whatever the proper interpretation may be, it would seem to be at odds with the typical Calvinist view of irresistible grace. The same word is used in John 12:32 as Jesus assures, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” If the Calvinist is consistent in his interpretation, universalism would seem to be implicated by this passage. Second, however the term translated “draw” is understood in texts dealing with physical objects (material items), that the context of human will, mind or heart (non-material items) is in view already alters the way it is being used. Finally, despite the misconception regarding Traditional Baptists held by certain Calvinists, we have clearly affirmed that man cannot redemptively come to God without the work of the “Holy Spirit through the Gospel.” Thus, the passage in question does not strike against the TS position and fails to serve as a declaration of compatibilism.

The Logical and Moral Problems

Not only is the biblical basis for compatibilism suspect, it cannot avoid the logically problematic situation of the sinner being punished for choosing one of his only sinful options, *A*. In, for example, Luke 12:4 and Mark 9:42–49, Jesus himself is found warning individuals of what will happen if they remain at enmity with God. He stresses the nature and reality of hell to serve as a clear motivation and clarion call to redemption. In the well-known Matt 23:37–39 passage, Jesus explains that peace could have been had on the part of those unbelievers He references if only they would have come to God, but He says of them, “you were not willing.” While many Calvinists are quick to point out that salvation may not have been in view here, the call to make a libertarian choice in submission to the Father surely is. If compatibilism is true, then there is no way that these stiff-necked people could have chosen *C*; thus, the passionate declaration of Christ would have been misdirected.

⁷R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1994), 52. While making the case for this interpretation, Sproul quotes *Kittel’s Theological Dictionary*, explaining that the passage means to “compel by irresistible superiority.”

The Problem of General and Effectual Calling

The problems of compatibilism are further compounded by the questionable separation of the “general” and “effectual” calls of God. Article 8 denies this distinction. The only logical purpose of the general call is to attempt to obviate the moral and logical problems stated above. If the effectual call goes out to only the elect, and only the elect can respond to it, then what of the general call? Two possible reasons for the general call come into view. It could be that the general call is merely the byproduct of the preaching of the word for the elect. In attempting to spread the gospel so that the elect might respond, the message spills over to the non-elect. They hear, but cannot respond to the message. After all, Calvinists agree that they should evangelize every person because of their ignorance of who is and is not elect. Still, on this view, the general call does not even actually go out to every man. It goes out to the elect and is heard by others. Perhaps the general call exists so that the guilt of those who do not respond to it is made even more apparent. However, if this is the case, we must loop back to the problem previously mentioned. They are still being punished for choosing *A* rather than *C*, when *C* was not available to them. Either way, what is the purpose of the general call? It seems to be a strange byproduct of a compatibilistic view of biblical freedom. Such a division between a general and effectual call is not necessary for those who see biblical freedom as libertarian, and thus it is denied in the statement. Common proof texts related to the division of the effectual and general calls such as Romans 8:29–30 do not *require* readers to fall into a framework which is fraught with the philosophical problems mentioned. Is the Calvinistic explanation of such texts the only possible understanding? Does it represent a position that can be demonstrated with overwhelming certainty? Certainly not.

Compatibilism’s Vulnerability to Atheistic Arguments

Compatibilism also is vulnerable to the strongest arguments for God’s non-existence offered by atheists. The incoherence arguments known as “arguments from evil,” seek to demonstrate that either (1) God’s existence is not possible (a logical argument from evil) or (2) God’s existence is improbable (an evidential argument from evil) because of the amount of suffering, pain, or evil that exists in the world. A loving God, it is claimed, would not create a world in which such evil exists. When Christian apologists respond to such charges, they offer theodicies in defense of God. The theodicies that fit best with compatibilism are the “greater good” and “character building” theodicies. Greater good theodicies make the case that God created a world with evil for the purpose of establishing some greater good via the presence of those evils. Character building theodicies usually make a similar move with respect to the development of human moral character. Nevertheless, each of these theodicies leaves us with a God who is the ultimate causal agent behind all evil that exists.

Jerry Walls has argued that on such compatibilistic views, God is ultimately to blame in that a person who commits an evil act against his neighbor was ordained to commit that evil act because he was bound by those desires which bring the greater good—God’s glory. Walls summarizes and responds to this view,

[If] God must display justice by punishing evil in order fully to manifest his glory, then sin and evil must occur for God's full glory to be demonstrated. The disconcerting consequence here is that God needs evil or depends on it fully to manifest his glory. This consequence undermines not only God's goodness, but his sovereignty as well.⁸

Free will theodicy fits best with soft-libertarianism and avoids the implication that God is the causal agent behind evil actions by placing individual volition into the hands of mankind. Evil occurs because man was given libertarian free will by God. If man is given the ability to make free choices, it is inevitable that he will ultimately choose to commit some evil. Even natural disasters can be explained if a free will theodicy is brought to bear on the story of the Fall.

One might argue that even theodicies based on the concept of free will do not justify God's allowance of evil. Why would He not create men with libertarian free will, yet work as a preventative force so that evil does not occur? Again, two problems would be introduced in such a world. One is philosophical and the second, practical. First, a rephrasing of this question would be, "Why doesn't God force man to freely do no evil?" Hopefully, the incoherence of the idea is obvious. Forcing someone to freely do something is a flat contradiction. Second, if God were to allow for evil free actions but miraculously work to prevent harm, certain natural laws could not be trusted. A world in which God is constantly preventing evil when it is about to happen is a world in which the laws of science would be constantly suspended such that, in one setting, fire burns, while in a potentially dangerous setting, fire cannot be produced. For obvious reasons, a world in which the laws of science cannot be trusted would be a difficult world in which to live. Moreover, a free will theodicy can bring out the benefits that other theodicies seek to highlight.

Admittedly, character building and greater good theodicies recognize the powerful and transformative vehicle for change that tragedy often reveals itself to be. The problem, as stated above, is that God is understood to be the causal agent behind those evil events. Yet, advocates of free will theodicies hold that while the evil itself is the work of man, character development and greater goods often result. This means free will theodicies also recognize the positive benefits of having endured evil, yet do not make the major theological mistakes of the competing views.

On this view, created beings are the causal agents behind the evil that exists in the world. Such a charge cannot be made against the Father. While some might demand that God's foreknowledge of evil events should have dissuaded him from creating the world at all, most will likely see that the existence of the created order is an intrinsic good which outstretches the inevitability of evil and suffering. Of all people, those who believe in Christian eschatology should recognize this. As for the current state of affairs, we are to blame for evil, but God is to be praised for good. The existence of evil, then, is best explained by the existence of human libertarian freedom. Any view which denies libertarian creaturely freedom necessarily holds God to be the causal agent behind all evil.

⁸Jerry L. Walls, "Why No Classical Theist, Let Alone Orthodox Christian, Should Ever be a Compatibilist," *Philosophia Christi* 13.1 (2011): 75.

A Soft-Libertarian Model of Soteriology

If a position that is anything like what Traditionalists have in mind is to be adopted, then it seems needful that a libertarian soteriological explanation be given. Nevertheless, what follows is but one explanation that might be accepted by Traditionalists. As previously mentioned, Southern Baptists who have in the past been described as “non-Calvinists” have understood salvation in a few varying ways which neither violate orthodoxy nor depart from soft-libertarianism. With this disclaimer in mind, I will begin with a consideration of the sovereignty of God.

God’s sovereignty necessitates His power, ability and freedom to act authoritatively with respect to the created order. It does not mean that he is incapable of creating free agents in that created order. Indeed, His glory shines all the more evidently in that, via his omniscience, he is able to instantiate a universe of free agents while ensuring that ultimate victory is certain. The Creator would only lack sovereignty if it were the case that He found himself unable to superintend or affect His creation. God, however, is both aware of all temporal events and able to affect them. Neither open-theism nor lack of sovereignty holds. Furthermore, this sovereignty implies, for both Calvinists and Traditionalists, that the salvation of the believer is in no way meritorious.

Despite man’s soft-libertarian free will, he is in no way deserving of praise for accepting the gift of grace. Even if one rebuts that the acceptance of the gift of salvation itself is, in some way, an intrinsically admirable work on the part of the new believer, Traditionalists are prepared to offer a response that seems philosophically favorable.

Because Scripture teaches that grace is of God (Ephesians 2:8), and that God is not responsible for human sin (Luke 17:1,2), a model is necessary that would satisfy both of these propositions. Typically, Calvinists are criticized for implicating God as the source of evil, while non-Calvinists are accused of teaching that man merits his own salvation. Thus, a soteriological view must be located that would plausibly handle these matters.

In his work, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, Kenneth Keathley argues for what is known as an “ambulatory model of overcoming grace.”⁹ Keathley writes, “If you believe, it is because (and only because) the Holy Spirit brought you to faith. If you do not believe, it is only because you resisted. The only thing you are able to ‘do’ is negative.”¹⁰ In other words, man is not able to achieve a work of grace for himself, however, he is free to resist God’s grace. The explanatory power of the model should be apparent. On this view, man cannot be praised, since he did not bring about the grace he has experienced, but he *is* at fault if he denies the grace of God by exercising his freedom to that end. This view represents soft-libertarianism in the truest sense.

⁹Though Keathley’s work represents a definitively Molinist position, the ambulatory model does not necessitate a Molinist view.

¹⁰Kenneth Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville:B&H Academic, 2010), 104.

these two propositions make for an understanding of divine sovereignty and creaturely freedom wherein God alone is glorified in salvation, and man alone is responsible in condemnation. The case is made even more apparent if one accepts that God's grace is so great that he chose to create a world in which those who freely receive this gift would be saved.

Soft-Libertarianism and the *Baptist Faith and Message*

The *Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM) contains two articles that come to bear directly on the matter under discussion. Article 3 (which explains the Southern Baptist view of the doctrine of man) asserts, "Man is the special creation of God, made in His own image." Naturally, this is uncontroversial. However, it is vital for understanding the will of man. That man is created in the image of God is consistent with soft-libertarianism in that the latter would require that freedom is a gift from God and a similarity that individuals share with Him. The article goes on to explain,

In the beginning man was innocent of sin and was endowed by his Creator with freedom of choice. By his free choice man sinned against God and brought sin into the human race. Through the temptation of Satan man transgressed the command of God, and fell from his original innocence whereby his posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin.

Again, no conflict exists. It certainly counts in favor of soft-libertarianism that the BFM states that Adam had the attribute of freedom. By this we may assume some form of libertarianism since man was not yet affected by sin. Naturally, though, the point of dispute among Southern Baptists is the phrase, "...his posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin." Happily, believers who advocate a soft-libertarian position find no difficulty with this. We agree that man is influenced by his sinful environment and nature. The caveat, which is not ruled out by the article, is that this results in a hindered will, but not a will of only determined desires. Therefore, Traditionalists can gladly affirm Article 3.

The same is true for Article 5 which speaks to "God's Purpose of Grace." Article 5 begins with the claim, "Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners." Naturally, Calvinists and Traditionalists are in disagreement regarding how, when and for whom these events become a reality. The statement, however, in no way excludes a libertarian perspective. Indeed, the following phrase avers, "It is consistent with the free agency of man..." Even if some ambiguity surrounds what is meant by "free" in this passage, when interpreted according to its use in Article 3, libertarianism emerges. Either way, a libertarian position is no doubt consistent with the article. Lastly, since Traditionalist soft-libertarians affirm God's sovereignty and the concept of the eternal security of the believer, the rest of the article appropriately articulates a view that we celebrate.

Conclusion

All of the evidence above serves to support the view represented by Article 8 of the TS. Scripture clearly implies the existence of human libertarian free will, both directly and indirectly. The separation of the general and effectual calls, held by Calvinists, is an awkward byproduct of a compatibilist theological view that ultimately fails to salvage its unacceptable implications. The idea that God would hold man accountable for following the desires over which he has no control undercuts any legitimate understanding of human responsibility. Man is only responsible if he exercises volition. Compatibilism leaves believers with little or nothing to say concerning the problem of evil. If God is the causal agent behind the evil of the world, then it would seem that some atheistic arguments from evil may be valid. This, of course, cannot be true. Therefore, it is more plausible that man is responsible for the evil of the world because of his libertarian freedom. Ultimately, God is sovereign over man in that He is in control of the world He chose to create, and He could have acted otherwise. As the affirmation clarifies, man has libertarian free will because it was endowed to him by God, “as an expression of His sovereignty.” This gift of libertarian free will to every person, though damaged by sin so thoroughly that it could never empower the sinner to choose Christ on his own, must still be exercised in response to the enabling power of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the gospel.

Commentary on Article 9: The Security of the Believer



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Introduction

One afternoon a few years ago, a couple who lived down the street from the church came to see me. The woman pulled out a copy of Charles Stanley's *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?*¹ and asked, "Do you believe what's in this book?" I confessed that I had not read it but was reasonably sure that I believed what was in it. The couple went on to tell me that they had bought the book simply because of the title. The woman had read the whole thing in one evening, and her husband had read enough of it the next morning to get the essential idea. Seeing on the book jacket that Stanley was a Baptist, they decided to go to the nearest Baptist church to get more details. Coming from a religious tradition that had taught them that it was impossible, even perhaps sinful and certainly arrogant, to claim assurance of salvation,² this couple was eager to know the peace and joy that accompanies eternal security.

Article Nine:

The Security of the Believer

We affirm that when a person responds in faith to the Gospel, God promises to complete the process of salvation in the believer into eternity. This process begins with justification, whereby the sinner is immediately acquitted of all sin and granted peace with God; continues in sanctification, whereby the saved are progressively conformed to the image of Christ by the indwelling Holy Spirit; and concludes in glorification, whereby the saint enjoys life with Christ in heaven forever.

We deny that this Holy Spirit-sealed relationship can ever be broken. We deny even the possibility of apostasy.

John 10:28–29; 14:1–4; Romans 3:21–26; 8:29–30, 35–39; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Ephesians 1:13–14; Philippians 1:6; 3:12; Colossians 1:21–22; 2 Timothy 1:12; Hebrews 13:5; James 1:12; 1 John 2:19; 3:2; 5:13–15; Jude 24–25

¹Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990). Stanley tells the story of how he came to reject the erroneous view of apostasy that he had learned in a Pentecostal Holiness church.

²See as an example the Roman Catholic View as presented in Kenneth D. Keathley, "Perseverance and Assurance of the Saints," in *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, ed. David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 168.

The doctrine of the eternal security of the believer is of great significance for Southern Baptists and is central to the way we do the work of evangelism and discipleship. One might suppose that all Southern Baptists agree on this matter and that, therefore, this is not one of the contested doctrines in the current Calvinist debate.³ Indeed, the idea of eternal security is stated unequivocally in Article 5 of the *Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM).

All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end. Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, and bring reproach on the cause of Christ and temporal judgments on themselves; yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

The language of Article 12 of the Abstract of Principles is quite similar. The issues of greatest concern in both of these documents⁴ are the genuineness of conversion, the impossibility of apostasy, and the inevitability of some continued sin in the life of the genuine believer. Any Southern Baptist confession seeking to aver salvation by faith through grace alone must also have this kind of strong statement concerning eternal security. Millard Erickson gets to the crux of this issue. On one hand, a theology that does not affirm eternal security leads to anxiety about one's spiritual condition. On the other, a view of eternal security that does not point to genuine conversion leads to "indifference to the moral and spiritual demand of the gospel."⁵

Calvinists and Traditionalists agree about the reality of eternal security, but this does not mean that there are no serious issues to unravel in the discussion. First, what is the basis of assurance? Second, can one affirm perseverance without necessarily committing himself to all of the other "doctrines of grace"? Third, how does each perspective deal with the difficult passages which seem to hold to some form of apostasy? Fourth, can the wrong view of assurance lead to "false conversions"?

What is the Basis of Assurance?

Even though the differences between the Abstract, which is more Calvinistic, and the BFM appear to be slight, they illustrate a challenging dynamic even within this supposedly uncontested doctrine. The BFM begins with the declaration, "All true believers endure to the end," which inserts the language of the New Hampshire Confession's article on perseverance before the first sentence of the Abstract. The BFM, therefore, begins the discussion of perseverance with an

³For example, the 2013 document *Truth, Trust, and Testimony in a Time of Tension: A Statement from the Calvinism Advisory Committee* does not include any reference to the understanding of eternal security in the list of tensions.

⁴Noticeably absent from both is the language of the Westminster Confession, XVII, 2, which states, "This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election ..."

⁵Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 997.

emphasis on *belief*, which is muted in the Abstract. The clear implication is that the BFM seeks to make clear that *believing* is the basis for security. Additionally, the BFM makes specific that it is “believers” who are the subject of God’s preserving power. The direction of Southern Baptist soteriology as it moved into the twentieth century was toward an emphasis on the centrality of belief as the basis for assurance, buttressed by the reality of sanctification.

While most Southern Baptists tend to use “perseverance of the saints” and “eternal security” interchangeably, nuances in the terminology also reveal the differences in the bases of assurance. The Calvinist view of “perseverance of the saints” places the emphasis of assurance on the evidence of the believer’s activity rather than the believer’s faith in the provision of Christ. The danger, of course, is that such thinking can slide inadvertently into a works-oriented basis for security. Consider this example from the popular and prolific John Piper: “It’s true that Paul believed in the eternal security of the elect (‘Those whom [God] justified he also glorified’ [Rom 8:30]). But the only people who are eternally secure are those who ‘make their calling and election sure’ by fighting the good fight of faith and laying hold on eternal life.”⁶ Such reasoning complicates the issue of eternal security and potentially leads to more doubt than assurance by making the works of obedience the basis of eternal security rather than promises of Christ that belong to the believer by faith. There is, to be sure, a tension in Scripture due to its exhortative nature.

Ken Keathley, however, manages the tension between faith and works in this way: “Good works and the evidences of God’s grace do not provide assurance. They provide warrant to assurance but not assurance itself.”⁷ Therefore, to avoid confusion about what is meant about our view of assurance, it may be better to speak of “security of the believer,” rather than “perseverance of the saints.” Security of the believer emphasizes a present state-of-being based on faith that persists into the future rather than the continual manifestation of certain actions in the future. Eternal security is the companion of salvation by grace. One of the reasons that Baptists have overwhelmingly believed in a doctrine of eternal security is the strong belief in salvation by grace. Belief in the work of Christ for salvation results in the assurance of salvation. As Keathley notes, “Assurance of salvation must be based on Jesus Christ and His work for us—nothing more and nothing less.”⁸

Can Someone Affirm Eternal Security Without Affirming All Five Points of the TULIP?

Eternal security revolves around two significant questions. First, can one know with certainty that he is saved? Second, can the one who knows with certainty today that he is saved trust

⁶John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 46..

⁷Keathley, “Perseverance and Assurance of the Saints,” 186.

⁸*Ibid.*, 171.

that he will never fall away permanently?⁹ Southern Baptists of all stripes want to answer with a resounding “yes” to both questions. Either individuals have the promise of eternal security or they do not. The discussion is often framed as if there are only two options—the Calvinist position that says “yes” and the Arminian position that says “no.”¹⁰

If Calvinism is the only option for a strong view of eternal security, then the real possibilities for dialogue among Southern Baptists will be at impasse. In this arrangement, it is supposed that the non-Calvinist cannot affirm assurance of salvation because agnosticism on the issue of assurance is fundamental to Arminianism. Though he certainly cannot speak for every Calvinist, the language of Erwin Lutzer is the sort of tone that creates potential for heated and unhelpful debate. Lutzer says, “Whether or not you believe in eternal security depends on where you stand on the free-will controversy... The free will that accepts Christ is the same free will that can reject him.”¹¹

Tom Ascol follows Lutzer at this point. In a blog post criticizing the Traditional Statement, Ascol writes:

If the nature of fallen man’s will is such that he has the power of contrary choice either to trust Christ or reject Christ, how and why is this power lost once such a man becomes a Christian? Why must a Christian always remain a Christian? How can God keep him in the faith without “vitiating” his free will? It seems like this scheme leaves Christians with less of an “actual free will” (as Article Eight designates it) after conversion than before. These questions are sincere and I hope that the promoters and defenders of this document will address them. The hermeneutic that rejects unconditional election and effectual calling of believers cannot sustain, with consistency, their eternal security.¹²

Ascol’s view of assurance rests on a compatibilist view of freedom that has been shown elsewhere in these essays to be quite problematic. Since God cannot be the cause of evil, since faith requires a genuine response that includes the ability to do otherwise, and since humans are not robots, the Calvinistic understanding of freedom must be rejected. Ascol’s view actually drives a wedge between the reality of perseverance and the possibility of assurance. If salvation

⁹Keathley has succinctly presented the issues at hand. See “Perseverance and Assurance” in *Whosoever Will* and “The Word of God: Salvation,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 760–1.

¹⁰Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 985–7. This criticism notwithstanding, Erickson does a superb job of succinctly describing the two opposing views, supplying the important Scriptural texts that support each view and drawing the conclusion that the majority of Southern Baptists will affirm the certainty of eternal security.

¹¹Erwin Lutzer, *The Doctrines that Divide: A Fresh Look at the Historic Doctrines that Separate Christians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 225.

¹²Tom Ascol, “Response to A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation, Part 12,” June 16, 2012, <http://blog.founders.org/2012/06/12response-to-statement-of-traditional.html> (accessed November 12, 2013). In the original, the last sentence begins a new paragraph.

is based utterly on God's unconditioned choice of some and not others based on His hidden counsels, then how does one know that he is one of the elect? Should assurance of salvation be grounded in one's "feelings" or "sense" that he belongs to Christ? Such feelings can be false. What about the evidence of good works? The lost are capable of doing good things. It appears that the only sure foundation for assurance is the Traditionalist view that assurance is based on the accomplishments of Christ and His promises to anyone who believes by faith. How does one know he is saved? He believes that Jesus is who He says He is and that He will do what He says He will do. Feelings can certainly support such assurance, but there will be days when such feelings are not present. Works support such assurance but there will be days when such works are not present. If the inner sense of the Spirit's presence and the outward working of the Spirit are never on display, then soul-searching as to one's salvation is indeed necessary, but the basis of the search is still the same. The question is not, "Do my affections substantiate my election?" or "Have I done enough?" but "Have I trusted in Christ alone for salvation?" Assurance is not rooted in the doctrine of election or the doctrine of sanctification. It must be rooted in the doctrine of justification, or perseverance becomes a cause of doubt not a source of assurance. Calvinism tends to include inner witness and outward works as part of the basis for assurance because of the demands of determinism. The Traditional view, because it has a different view of freedom, allows assurance to rest on the only suitable cornerstone: justification by faith.

To answer Ascol's question about the nature of freedom after conversion, a question must first be asked of him: On the Calvinist view, why do the regenerate continue to sin? If inability to respond to God has been exchanged with the ability to respond to Him, why does the redeemed person sin? If the answer is that he chooses to do so, then Calvinism is no different than the non-Calvinist view. All that is left is that God withholds the grace necessary for the believer to always do right, which, once again, opens a Pandora's box concerning God's morality. On the Traditionalist view, the true convert has willingly surrendered himself to the sealing, transformational power of the gospel. He has said yes to God's commitment to unending fellowship. There is no going back; the freedom to walk away has been surrendered. However, as the Word says, such slavery is the truest kind of freedom (Rom 6:15–26).

What About the So-Called Apostasy Passages?

Ascol's question does raise the issue of the so-called apostasy passages of the New Testament, which Arminians use to support their position. If faith is a critical feature of assurance, and if faith requires a free response, then does it not stand to reason that one could "unfaith" at some later point and lose his salvation? Are there not indeed some Scriptures that support such a view? Though apostasy is not a serious debate among Southern Baptists, some degree of thought should be given to passages that others use as proof-texts to cast doubt on eternal security. Ascol's point seems to be that the Traditional view, because of its particular view of freedom, does not permit such passages to be interpreted any other way than affirming apostasy. The passages normally in question are from Hebrews: 2:1–4; 3:7–19; 4:11–16; 6:4–12; and 10:19–39. Those who affirm eternal security have approached these passages in one of two ways. Some have indicated that

these passages are hypothetical in nature, dealing with what *might* happen if someone *could* renounce his faith in Christ. The other approach is that the addressees were simply not true believers. Primarily because of the language of actual experience of salvation in 6:4–12, it seems clear that genuine believers are in the writer’s mind. The hypothetical argument is not plausible either. The details in these passages lend themselves to real, not hypothetical, issues.

The question of apostasy in these passages can best be answered by the context—the call to endure.¹³ When my wife delivered our son, I was instructed by the nurses to “coach” my wife. Obviously, our child would have been born with or without my “coaching.” Phrases like, “You can do it” did not imply that I thought there was the possibility that she might not give birth. Anyone going through pain of labor greatly needs encouragement. The writer of Hebrews was simply encouraging his fellow believers to persevere in keeping with the “already/not yet” eschatological import of the New Testament. He had every confidence that they were going to persevere. However, to the recipients, the exhortation, no doubt, was much needed in the midst of very difficult circumstances.

What About False Conversions?

A view of eternal security like the one here presented raises a pastoral and practical implication. One of the issues often raised by Calvinists is the fear of false conversions. This fear is expressed by Wayne Grudem:

But here we see why the phrase *eternal security* can be quite misleading. In some evangelical churches, instead of teaching the full and balanced presentation of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, pastors have sometimes taught a watered-down version, which in effect tells people that all who have once made a profession of faith and been baptized are “eternally secure.” The result is that some people who are not genuinely converted at all may “come forward” at the end of an evangelistic sermon to profess faith in Christ, and may be baptized shortly after that, but then they leave the fellowship of the church and live a life no different from the one they lived before they gained this “eternal security.” In this way people are given false assurance and are being cruelly deceived into thinking they are going to heaven when in fact they are not.¹⁴

Certainly, there is some validity to Grudem’s concern, and there are some who, by their carelessness, water down the gospel and preach “cheap grace.” A gospel that does not call people to surrender by faith to the absolute lordship of Christ is no gospel at all; such a message cannot save. Sadly, there are people who have responded emotionally to a truncated version of the gospel and have wrongly believed themselves to have been saved; they placed their hope in an insufficient reality.

¹³George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 224, states, “We must keep in mind that the genre of this passage is exhortation.”

¹⁴Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 806.

The Calvinist response to this situation, however, solves nothing. First, if God has already decided who is elect, then what does it matter whether the gospel is preached correctly or not (or preached at all for that matter)? The protestation that God elects the ends as well as the means simply begs the question. Second, as has already been argued, if election is unconditional, then what is the basis, outside of the hidden counsels of God, for assurance? What often happens is that the affirmation of certain doctrines become the proof upon which confidence rests, creating a false sense of security based on puffed-up knowledge. Third, did not Christ and Paul themselves have “false converts”? After sitting under such preaching and teaching, both Judas and Demas walked away. Was there some deficiency in what they had been taught? Was it because God secretly withheld saving grace while permitting their false belief for His own glory? Or, is the best and biblical explanation that Judas and Demas had shrunk the gospel down to fit their own selfish ends and never surrendered fully to the true message of salvation? In the end, we must go back to a balanced view of Scripture that all who believe in Him will be saved and that genuine belief will result itself in good works. The true solution to false conversions is the biblical solution: preach the whole gospel, passionately call people to repentance and faith, strengthen believers in the body of Christ, and trust the Lord to keep His promises.

Consider the confidence with which the apostles spoke of their assurance. Paul says, “For I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me” (2 Tim 1:12). An effective communicator of the gospel must speak with this kind of assurance in order to offer assurance to his hearers. He cannot say, “I think I will have eternal life” or “I hope I am of the elect.” With confidence, the bold witness must be able to communicate that he has believed in the grace of God unto salvation. The one without that assurance will always be timid in sharing his faith. Perhaps no greater word of assurance has ever been expressed than John’s words: “I have written these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). The one who doubts will forever be paralyzed into silence, at worst, or at least, be timid because of doubt. True assurance is based upon a strong belief in grace, the work of Christ upon the cross, and the Word of God. May that firm assurance be held in the heart of every believer so that we might have the courage to share that assurance so that all who believe in Jesus for eternal life will have confidence in every circumstance. May we say with great assurance and conviction that all are savable, and those who repent of their sin and believe in Jesus are saved forever.

Commentary on Article 10: The Great Commission



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Not only did God provide the means whereby lost humanity can be saved, but also God ordained the method whereby the message of salvation is to be communicated to the lost world. Of all the methods that the Lord could have employed to communicate the gospel to a lost and dying world, God in His sovereignty chose to use the method of human instrumentality to accomplish that task. Jesus commissioned the church to communicate His saving grace to all peoples in all the nations of the world throughout all time. This call in Scripture to join the Lord in reaching the world with the message of salvation is known as the Great Commission. The

term itself indicates that followers of Jesus Christ are expected to partner with the Lord in His mission of reaching the world with His message of salvation, hence the word “Commission,” indicating a joint mission effort between God and man.

Article Ten: The Great Commission

We affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned His church to preach the good news of salvation to all people to the ends of the earth. We affirm that the proclamation of the Gospel is God’s means of bringing any person to salvation.

We deny that salvation is possible outside of a faith response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Psalm 51:13; Proverbs 11:30; Isaiah 52:7; Matthew 28:19–20; John 14:6; Acts 1:8; 4:12; 10:42–43; Romans 1:16, 10:13–15; 1 Corinthians 1:17–21; Ephesians 3:7–9; 6:19–20; Philippians 1:12–14; 1 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Timothy 2:5; 2 Timothy 4:1–5

The Great Commission has been a subject of discussion before Southern Baptists in recent days. At the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Phoenix in 2011, the Convention voted on a controversial proposal under the title “The Great Commission Resurgence” (GCR). Apart from disagreement over the political, fiscal, and organizational aspects of the GCR report and adopted proposal, all Southern Baptist leaders are agreed that since approximately three-fourths of SBC churches are plateaued or declining, coupled with the fact that one-fourth of the churches consistently report no baptisms annually, a true resurgence in the practice of the Great Commission among the churches

in the denomination is of absolute necessity for the future of the SBC. In addition, a special committee was appointed by the SBC President to study the viability of a name change for the Southern Baptist Convention. The end result was that a name change was not proposed but a new descriptor was recommended for churches to utilize that feel that the name Southern Baptist is a hindrance to their outreach efforts in their contexts. The adopted informal name was Great Commission Baptists indicating the evident value and the focused thrust of the churches which make up the membership of the denomination. Southern Baptists from their inception have been a people committed to fulfilling the Great Commission in order that the world may be won to faith in Jesus Christ.

It is surprising to many Southern Baptists to learn that the actual term “Great Commission” does not appear anywhere in the Bible. Although the term itself is not found in Scripture, the concept of Commission is certainly evident. No doubt the Lord Jesus called for His disciples during His earthly ministry then as well as His followers now and throughout history to partner with Him in His mission from the Father to communicate God’s offer of forgiveness and eternal life to all who would repent of their sin and place their faith in Him. Although the focus is usually on what is called the Great Commission from the passage found in Matthew 28, the Bible records at least five Great Commission passages, one at the end of each of the four Gospel accounts and another at the beginning of the book of Acts. In these five different passages the Lord Jesus extended the crystal clear call for His followers to join Him in His mission of communicating the gospel to the world. These five Great Commission passages together constitute the missions imperative of the New Testament church.¹

Because each of these Great Commission passages contains a particular focus of the Lord’s call to join Him in communicating the gospel, it should prove to be beneficial to examine all of the passages in order to gain a comprehensive perspective of this clarion call to the church. The particular focus of each of the Commission passages will be incorporated in the discussion in order to assess the full intent of the Lord Jesus for the faithful involvement of the church in His mission to communicate His message of salvation to the world.² The greater focus will be given to the most recognized Great Commission passage because Matt 28:18–20 provides the fullest account of Christ’s Commission to His church.³

¹William L. Banks, *In Search of the Great Commission* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 13. See also James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive & Readable Theology*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 651, and Herschel H. Hobbs, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1971), 108.

²Mortimer Arias and Alan Johnson, *The Great Commission: Biblical Models for Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 11–14.

³As Herschel Hobbs states, *The Baptist Faith and Message*, 108, “An analysis of Matthew 28:18–20 is most revealing.”

The Motivation for the Great Commission

Before Jesus actually delivered the Great Commission to His disciples, He established His divine prerogative to issue it.⁴ He prefaced the Great Commission with these words, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:18b).⁵ To possess authority means to have the right and ability to command others to respond. Jesus declared that He possessed all authority in the universe.⁶ He did not state that He possessed a little authority or even a large amount of authority. He did not say He possessed some authority or even most authority. Jesus declared without equivocation that He possessed absolute authority, both universal and unlimited in its scope. With that statement He revealed Himself as sovereign Lord and king of the universe.⁷ He then commanded His disciples to “go, make disciples.”⁸ If someone with all power and all authority tells someone else to do something, the only logical and sane response is for the person to act in total obedience. Herein is revealed the major motivation for fulfilling the Great Commission: the command of Christ which necessitates the obedience of every believer.

Although other valid motivations for fulfilling the Great Commission are evident in Scripture, including the compassion of believers for Christ that compels them to witness for Him, the condition of lost sinners and the concern of the saved for their souls, as well as the coming of Christ, the final judgment, and the terrors of hell, the primary motivation for sharing the gospel is the command of Christ which every believer should obey. That fact was impressed strongly upon the mind of a young pastor who related the following incident which occurred early in his ministry.

A few weeks after my eighteenth birthday I became pastor of a small rural church. Soon after, I was asked to preach on a Sunday afternoon at the Associational Church Training Meeting. I preached on why the church and the individual believer should be evangelistic. Some of the

⁴As Robert E. Coleman, *The Great Commission Lifestyle: Conforming Your Life to Kingdom Priorities* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1992), 31, aptly observed, “All too easily we rush into the action mandate without pausing to consider what Jesus says first.”

⁵All Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

⁶Donald McGavran indicated that the part of the Great Commission that believers are most prone to forget is Christ’s declaration of authority, which provides the foundation as well as the motivation for fulfilling the Great Commission. Arthur F. Glasser, “My Last Conversation with Donald McGavran,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (January 1991): 59.

⁷Robert Coleman declared, “Jesus is Lord, able to do whatever He wills, and before Him every knee must bow.” He went on to say, “He has absolute sovereignty; His authority reaches across the vast expanse of the planet and unto the farthest star.” See Coleman, *Great Commission Lifestyle*, 19, 31.

⁸“Before challenging us with the imperative, Jesus reassures us with an indicative. Before He commands He asserts, and what He asserts is His unmitigated sovereignty.” See Thomas K. Ascol, “The Great Commission Tension: God’s Work and Ours” in *The Great Commission Resurgence: Fulfilling God’s Mandate in Our Time*, ed. Chuck Lawless and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 151.

reasons I gave were that people are lost without Christ, sinful, on the way to hell, and in need of a new birth. All of these reasons seemed convincing to me. At the conclusion of my message, our Director of Missions walked slowly toward the pulpit and in a deliberate manner said: “Brethren, it seems to me that we ought to be witnesses because Jesus told us to.”

The Director of Missions was exactly right, and I have never forgotten the lesson that I learned that day. While all the reasons that I had mentioned are valid, we should seek to reach people for Christ just because Jesus told us to do it. That is reason enough, and it should be motivation enough. If Jesus’ command will not prompt us to share our faith, nothing will.⁹

The Lord Jesus demands and expects that His followers evangelize their world. He allows no exceptions and refuses all excuses from those who claim to be His disciples. Obedience to the Commission of Christ results in the salvation of souls. Disobedience to the Commission of Christ impedes the progress of the Gospel. Whether or not Christians share their faith does make a difference in the expansion of the Kingdom of God. Roland Q. Leavell writes,

Evangelism has its compelling urge within an obedient, loving heart....Christians need to take seriously the commission of Christ. Evangelistic results will never come until disciples obey the command of Christ to go to the nations and make disciples. Great evangelistic harvests have and will come when disciples obey the orders of the King.¹⁰

The Mandate of the Great Commission

Following His unmistakable assertion of His absolute authority, the Lord Jesus then handed down the clear mandate of the Great Commission. Jesus’ authoritative command to His followers was “make disciples of all nations.” The imperative verb in Matt 28:19 is: “make disciples,” which is accompanied by three participles: going, baptizing, and teaching. As a result, four actions are required in order to fulfill the biblical mandate of the Great Commission. These actions flow in a logical and chronological order.¹¹

Move to Potential Disciples

The first action in verse 19 that believers must take in order to fulfill the mandate of the Great Commission is to move from where they are to where lost people are in order to see them come to faith in Jesus Christ. That action is expressed in the word “go.” The verb is a participle which can be translated literally “as you are going.” Although most interpret this participle as an assumption on the part of Christ that His followers would be going about sharing the gospel, the

⁹Waylon Bailey, *As You Go: Biblical Foundations for Evangelism* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1981), 6–7.

¹⁰Roland Q. Leavell, *Evangelism: Christ’s Imperative Commission*, revised by Landrum P. Leavell II and Harold T. Bryson (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979), 16.

¹¹Thomas P. Johnston, “Unleashing the Power of Matthew’s Great Commission” in *Mobilizing a Great Commission Church for Harvest*, ed. Thomas P. Johnston (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 11.

verb also can be seen as a direct admonition from Jesus for His followers to go share the gospel. A participle in the Greek language can have imperatival force, and because the verb is in the emphatic position (at the very beginning of the sentence) that would add credence to viewing the verb “go” as it is translated traditionally in most versions of the Bible as a simple imperative.¹² In other Scriptures the Lord Jesus clearly commanded His followers to go and take the message of salvation to the lost world. In the Great Commission passage in Mark 16:15, Jesus commanded, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” At the close of one of His parables Jesus related the words of the master of the household, “Go out into the highways and along the hedges and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:23). To the former Gadarene demoniac who became a disciple of Christ and wanted to accompany Jesus, the Lord said, “Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you” (Mark 5:19). The Lord Jesus Christ clearly commanded His followers to go to those who did not know Him and communicate the good news of how sinful mankind can be made right with the Holy God of the universe. Contemporary followers of Christ are commanded to do the same: go and share the gospel with others. Christians must move to where lost people are in order that the unsaved can hear the message of salvation. Unless someone goes and tells them how to be saved, they cannot hear and respond to the gospel message (Rom 10:13–17).

Make Disciples

The second action, according to verse 19, which believers must take in order to fulfill the mandate of the Great Commission is to make disciples of all nations. In fact, that is the primary action and focus of the passage since “make disciples” is the only imperative in the Matthew Commission. To make disciples means, very simply, to lead persons to place their faith in Christ. A disciple is a follower of Christ, but more specifically, from the very meaning of the word itself, a disciple is a disciplined learner of the Lord Jesus Christ. The popular cry of many concerning Christ’s mandate of the Great Commission is that believers are commanded to make disciples for Christ, not simply to get decisions for Christ. The reality is that this imperative of the mandate means to win the lost to faith in Christ by proclaiming to them the gospel. Probably a better rendering of the single word in the Greek language popularly translated “make disciples” is “win disciples.” The rationale for that translation is sound grammatically, linguistically, contextually, biblically, historically, and logically. Considering the other Great Commission passages, in order to make a disciple, first, the gospel of repentance and forgiveness must be declared to the potential disciple. That person must be won to faith in Christ in order to become a disciple or follower of Jesus. The word *matheteuo* in Matt 28:19 does not refer to the ongoing process of discipleship or sanctification in the life of the new believer but to the initiation of salvation or conversion. The command to disciple new converts is found in the participle “teaching them to observe” later in the passage. No distinction exists between a convert and a disciple in this passage as is taught

¹²Leavell, *Imperative Commission*, 15.

popularly by many today.¹³ The mandate of the commission is to proclaim the gospel to the lost and to seek to lead them to become faithful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mark Disciples

The third action necessary to fulfill the mandate of the Great Commission is to mark disciples by “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” When the newly reached convert is baptized by immersion in water he identifies with the Lord Jesus Christ through that symbolic act depicting the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Simultaneously, the new disciple identifies with the church into which he is baptized. The new convert also gives testimony of death to his former life, the cleansing of sin, and the new life he has received from Christ. Through baptism the church marks the new convert as a disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of the body of Christ.

Mature Disciples

The fourth action necessary to fulfill the mandate of the Great Commission is to mature disciples; that is, to help the new converts to become fully functional, faithful, fruitful followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. This action is revealed in Jesus’ words “teaching them to observe all things I commanded you” (Matt 28:20a). The admonition to mature disciples refers to the process of discipleship through which new believers should be guided. This teaching aspect of the Great Commission is what many mistakenly refer to as “make disciples,” which as revealed previously is winning individuals to faith in Jesus Christ. At this time in the life of the new convert he or she is to be equipped by other believers to walk with the Lord, worship the Lord, and witness for the Lord. Specifically, the new disciple is to be taught to obey the Lord and observe all His commandments. He is not simply to be given instruction in all things that the Lord commanded, but to be admonished to obey the Lord in all things.

Traditionally the initial stage of discipling a new convert has been called “immediate follow-up” while the ongoing process of discipleship for a new believer has been referred to as “long-term follow-up,” or discipleship training. The teaching, mentoring, or equipping process of a new disciple can be done through a one-on-one relationship with a believer more mature in the faith discipling a new follower of Christ. This traditionally has been called a “Paul and Timothy” relationship, reflecting the role the Apostle Paul played in helping the younger Timothy mature in his faith and service to the Lord. The discipling process can be done in an informal group setting or in a more formal discipleship class for new believers led by a more mature believer in the faith.

¹³Johnston, “Unleashing the Power,” 5–6. For an insightful discussion of the biblical and practical rationale for translating *matheteuo* as “win disciples” rather than “make disciples,” see pages 1–13. See also Idem, “The Great Commission” in *Evangelizology: A Biblical-Historical Perspective on Evangelism* (Liberty, MO: Evangelism Unlimited, 2011), 501–5.

The Means of the Great Commission

The means, or the agency, by which the Great Commission is accomplished is indicated in the promise Jesus gave to His followers at the conclusion of His Commission on the designated mountain in Galilee as recorded in Matthew's Gospel. He declared, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20b). He promised the disciples that His presence would accompany them as they attempted to fulfill the mandate of the Great Commission. This is the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, Who is the presence of Jesus with believers now. Through the Lord's power the Great Commission can and will be accomplished.

This truth is borne out in other Great Commission passages in the Gospel accounts of both Luke and John, as well as the book of Acts. Following Jesus' admonition that the disciples were to proclaim in His name to all the nations repentance for the forgiveness of sins, because they had been witnesses of His death and resurrection (Luke 24:46–47), He told them to remain in Jerusalem until they received the Father's promise of the Holy Spirit and "were clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). The Holy Spirit came upon them on the day of Pentecost, evidenced by the sound of a rushing wind, tongues like flames of fire on their heads, and their ability to witness for the Lord in other languages (Acts 2:1–13). Jesus previously had told the disciples that as the Father had sent Him on mission to the earth, He was sending them on mission and symbolically portrayed how they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, by breathing on them (John 20:21–22). Immediately prior to His ascension in His parting words of commissioning to His disciples, Jesus declared, "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Clearly from these passages of Scripture (Acts 2:1–13) the means or agency by which the Great Commission is performed is the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit through the life of the obedient witnessing believer. Only the power of God's Holy Spirit can change people's lives. The Spirit, through the witness of the believer, convicts the lost of their sin against God, convinces them of their need for Christ, and when they repent of their sin and place their faith in Jesus, converts their souls (John 16:8–11; 15:26; 3:5–6; Titus 3:5).

The Method of the Great Commission

The method, or strategy, God has chosen to employ in order for the Great Commission to be accomplished is the evangelistic witness of His followers in His church. According to the Great Commission passages, God's method of communicating the gospel to the world is through both the personal witness and the public proclamation of the gospel of His beloved Son by those who know Him. The word "witness" appears in two of the Great Commission passages and is implied strongly in two others; whereas, the words "preach" or "proclaim" appear in two of the passages as well. One of the Great Commission passages contains forms of both words. The object of proclamation is the gospel revealing that mankind through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus can receive forgiveness and enter a right relationship with the Father (Acts 20:21).

Jesus Christ fully accomplished all that was necessary for the redemption of mankind. Jenkins explains,

(W)hat remained was that the good news concerning it, the gospel, had to be carried and proclaimed to the ends of the earth. Hence the Great Commission—given first to the apostles and through them to those who would succeed them in faith and work.... In this Great Commission, then, we see the mammoth and momentous task assigned by Christ to his apostles and inevitably those who follow in their train....the Lord's plain words in the commission—clearly meant that the mandate given the apostles was intended also for all who would follow them in every succeeding generation...¹⁴

Through the Great Commission the Lord Jesus gave the monumental task of communicating the availability of redemption to all those who would become His followers in the church throughout the ages. God's method for delivering the message of salvation since the ascension of Christ back to heaven once the final Commission was given to His disciples has been through the personal and public proclamation of those who have experienced the saving grace of Christ. The Lord left the greatest message ever to be proclaimed in the hands of imperfect human beings, as represented by the first disciples and all subsequent followers of Christ. Until Christ comes again His plan is, as it always has been, for someone who trusts Christ for salvation to tell someone else how he or she can be saved.

The Message of the Great Commission

All of the Commission passages make clear what believers are to do to fulfill the Great Commission. These passages set forth the mandate that believers are to bear witness of Christ in order that nonbelievers will be converted to Him and become His disciples. Two of the five Commission passages specifically identify the saving message that is to be shared with the lost. In Mark 16:15, Jesus commanded His disciples to "preach the Gospel to every creature." The object of proclamation in this passage is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Clearly the particular message of the Great Commission that believers are to share is the gospel. Jesus revealed more specific aspects of this gospel message in the Lukan Commission, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46–47). The focus of the gospel message as Jesus related it is His substitutionary sacrifice on the cross of Calvary for the sins of humanity and His victorious bodily resurrection from the grave for the salvation of mankind (Rom 4:25). Further, the message includes the requirement for salvation and response from the hearers, which is repentance for the forgiveness of their sin and trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ, indicated by the phrase "in His name" (Acts 20:21).

In keeping with these Commission passages, the apostle Paul summarized the content of the

¹⁴T. Omri Jenkins, *The Great Commission* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1997), 22–29.

gospel when he addressed the believers in Corinth to whom he had preached. He specifically identified the message of the gospel as the life, death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:1–11). The gospel is God’s plan of salvation for sinful mankind and it is found exclusively in Jesus Christ. Many methods exist for communicating the gospel but there is only one plan of salvation and it is Jesus! Today, some people refer to the gospel in such broad terms that they indicate it encompasses all the truths of Scripture. Without maintaining the biblical definition and focus of the gospel on the saving work of Jesus Christ, the gospel can become whatever the theologian or preacher deems it to be. The result is that without the “razor focus” which Jesus and Paul gave concerning the gospel as salvation in Jesus Christ, the theologian or preacher can lay claim that he is teaching or preaching the gospel when he essentially is proclaiming various religious truths and even a doctrinal system. The gospel is about how someone can be saved through Jesus Christ. The message of the Great Commission is simply that Jesus will save anyone and everyone who will come to Him in repentance and faith (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9; Rom 10:13–17). The good news is that sinful mankind can come into right relationship with the Holy God of the universe when individual sinners acknowledge their sin and accept Jesus as their Savior and Lord. As the Bible declares, “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:13).

The Magnitude of the Great Commission

The magnitude of the Great Commission is directly stated or strongly implied in all five of the Great Commission passages. Common to all of the Commission passages is the extent to which the Great Commission is to be implemented. Jesus made it clear through His language when delivering the Great Commission to His disciples that it encompassed a world-wide dimension. In the Great Commission passage in Matthew, Jesus commanded His followers to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt 28:19). which meant all the people groups (literally, ethnic groups) on the face of the earth. The universal scope of the Great Commission was delineated by Jesus in the Commission passage in Mark when He commanded, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). Luke recorded that Jesus commissioned His disciples to proclaim the message of “repentance for forgiveness of sins...to all the nations” (Luke 24:47). In John’s Gospel, Jesus declared that as He had been sent on mission to this earth by the Father, He was sending His disciples on mission to share the message of forgiveness with the whole world (John 20:21, 23). In the last words of Commission from Christ to His disciples before He ascended to heaven, He told them they were to be His witnesses, “both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The disciples were to give witness for Christ to every person possible in every possible place beginning locally and progressing globally throughout history (Matt 28:20).

The magnitude of the Great Commission indicates God’s desire for all people throughout the entire earth to hear and to respond to the message of salvation. Since Christ died for the sins of all mankind, the offer of salvation is available to all who will call on the name of the Lord in repentance and faith (John 3:16; Acts 20:21; Rom 10:13; 1 Tim 4:10; Titus 2:11; 1 John

2:2; 4:14). God's will is that all people come to salvation through His Son. This truth is stated explicitly in two verses, one from the writings of the apostle Paul and the other from those of the apostle Peter. Paul wrote to Timothy that the Lord "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). Peter wrote that the Lord does "not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Therefore, the responsibility of the church is to fulfill the mission to which Christ has called her and that mission in obedience and cooperation with the Lord, hence the term "Commission," is to proclaim the message of salvation to all peoples on the face of the earth so that all who believe will be saved.

Mistakes Related to the Great Commission

Mistakes have been made throughout Christian history related to the Great Commission. Some people have claimed that the Great Commission was given only to the original apostles and as a result should not be the basis for the church's mission. Others have concluded that the task of spreading the gospel to all nations has been completed; therefore, the Great Commission should not set the agenda for the thrust of the ministry of the church. Further, some have rejected the Great Commission as the priority of the present day church, believing it to be an outdated command that is culturally-conditioned. Pluralism has influenced these adherents to this view to value tolerance to such a degree that they believe no one should attempt to convert another person to his or her religious faith as mandated by the Great Commission.¹⁵

Probably the most prevalent mistake made currently concerning the Great Commission is by those who adhere to a deterministic theological system which causes some of them to diminish or even dismiss the vital role that the witness of the church plays in the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Their almost exclusive focus upon the sovereignty of God in evangelism and missions causes some of them to forget that the task of evangelizing the world was given to the church to be fulfilled in cooperation with Christ Himself. That is why it is called "The Great Commission!" The prefix "co—" at the beginning of a word means "together with." Together with Christ, under His authority and by His power, the church is commanded to take the salvation message of the gospel to the entire world and make disciples of all nations for the expansion of God's Kingdom and for the exaltation of Christ among all the peoples of the earth.

Conclusion

The means of fulfilling the Great Commission is the power of the Holy Spirit. The method God in His sovereignty has chosen is the evangelistic witness of His own people who have experienced His redemption and are obedient to proclaim the availability of His salvation to all

¹⁵For an expanded discussion of these objections to the Great Commission see Robert L. Plummer, "The Great Commission in the New Testament" in *The Challenge of the Great Commission: Essays on God's Mandate for the Local Church*, ed. Chuck Lawless and Thomas Rainer (Crestwood, KY: Pinnacle Publishers, 2005), 35–37.

who will repent of their sin and by faith receive Christ as their personal Savior and Lord. What a phenomenal privilege it is for believers to be called to partner with Christ in carrying out the Great Commission! What an awesome responsibility it is for believers to be tasked with proclaiming the most precious yet most powerful story known to mankind, the gospel story of God's offer of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ which is the message of the Great Commission. May the church of the living God be ever faithful to the "marching orders" delivered by her Lord and Master Jesus Christ, and carry out the mandate of the Great Commission to make disciples of all peoples on the earth in order that those who receive His gift of salvation will be among that innumerable multitude in heaven "from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev 7:9–10; also 5:9–10) giving praise, honor, and glory to Jesus Christ forever and ever! Amen!

Is the Traditional Statement Semi-Pelagian?



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Shedding a false charge can be difficult. Consider as an example McCarthyism in the 1950s. A person publicly accused of belonging to the Communist Party had difficulty shaking the accusation. “You’re a Communist. Prove you’re not!” How does one disprove such an accusation? Those who affirm “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation” (TS) find themselves in a similar situation. Claims have been made that the TS is, or appears to be, semi-Pelagian. This chapter seeks to disprove the charge in four ways. First, historical and theological definitions of semi-Pelagianism will be provided and will be shown to be contradicted by claims in the TS. Second, it will be demonstrated that the theological claims made at the Second Council of Orange (529) fail to indict the TS as unbiblical. Third, the historical-theological context of fifth-century semi-Pelagianism suggests that the historical debate has no connection to the current conversation among Southern Baptists regarding the TS. Fourth, errors will be exposed in an early assessment of the TS.

Historical and Theological Definitions of Semi-Pelagianism Which are Contradicted by the Traditional Statement

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, semi-Pelagianism “maintained that the first steps towards the Christian life were ordinarily taken by the human will and that grace supervened only later.”¹ The TS explicitly argues against this view. Consider this line from Article 2: “While no one is even remotely capable of achieving salvation through his own effort, no sinner is saved apart from a free response to the Holy Spirit’s drawing through the Gospel.” Article 2 is clear that sinners are saved through a free response to the Holy Spirit’s drawing through the Gospel. This drawing of the Holy Spirit described in the TS occurs *prior* to the response of the sinner. In this way, the TS *prohibits* the semi-Pelagian understanding of a sinner taking the first steps toward the Christian life.

The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* explains that the term semi-Pelagian first appeared in 1577 to describe the fifth-century view which rejected Pelagian theology and respected Augustine but rejected some of the implications of his views. Fifth-century semi-Pelagians “affirmed that the unaided will performed the initial act of faith.” The “pivotal issue” in semi-Pelagian theology

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., s. v. “Semipelagianism.”

is “the priority of the human will over the grace of God in the initial work of salvation.”² Article 4 of the TS contradicts this view, “We affirm that grace is God’s generous decision to provide salvation for any person by taking all of the initiative in providing atonement.” The TS states that God takes “all of the initiative in providing atonement.” The TS in no way prioritizes “the human will over the grace of God in the initial work of salvation.”

Lewis and Demarest’s *Integrative Theology* explains, “The semi-Pelagians claimed that sinners make the first move toward salvation by choosing to repent and believe.” Also, “The semi-Pelagian scheme of salvation thus may be described by the statement ‘I started to come, and God helped me.’” The idea that sinners initiate their salvation apart from God’s grace is ruled out by the words of the TS. Consider again Article 2, “While no one is even remotely capable of achieving salvation through his own effort, no sinner is saved apart from a free response to the Holy Spirit’s drawing through the Gospel.”³ Also, this sentence from Article 4 bears repeating, “We affirm that grace is God’s generous decision to provide salvation for any person by taking all of the initiative in providing atonement.” The TS is clear that sinners do not “make the first move toward salvation.” Rather, God takes *all* of the initiative in providing atonement. Article 8 explains that “God’s gracious call to salvation” is made “by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.” Sinners are saved by responding to the drawing of the Holy Spirit through the gospel.

One more definition, this one from a Reformed perspective, will be provided in order to reinforce the argument that there is a broad consensus on the term semi-Pelagianism. *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* defines semi-Pelagianism as follows: “A term which has been used to describe several theories which were thought to imply that the first movement towards God is made by human efforts unaided by grace.”⁴ This definition is consistent with those already provided and is contradicted by statements in the TS as demonstrated above. The following chart illustrates our findings:

²Richard Kyle, “Semi-Pelagianism,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 1089–90.

³Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 3:20–21.

⁴E. J. Yarnold, “Semi-pelagianism,” *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 536.

Definitions of Semi-Pelagianism

It “maintained that the first steps towards the Christian life were ordinarily taken by the human will and that grace supervened only later.”

- *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*

It “affirmed that the unaided will performed the initial act of faith” and “the priority of the human will over the grace of God in the initial work of salvation.” - *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*

“The semi-Pelagians claimed that sinners make the first move toward salvation by choosing to repent and believe.” Also, “The semi-Pelagian scheme of salvation thus may be described by the statement ‘I started to come, and God helped me.’”

- *Integrative Theology*

“A term which has been used to describe several theories which were thought to imply that the first movement towards God is made by human efforts unaided by grace.” - *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*

Semi-Pelagianism Contradicted by the Traditional Statement

“While no one is even remotely capable of achieving salvation through his own effort, no sinner is saved apart from a free response to the Holy Spirit’s drawing through the Gospel.”

- Article 2

“We affirm that grace is God’s generous decision to provide salvation for any person by taking all of the initiative in providing atonement.”

- Article 4

“God’s gracious call to salvation” is made “by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.”

- Article 8

The Decisions of the Second Council of Orange Which Fail to Indict the TS as Unbiblical

Immediately after the release of the TS, there were online accusations that the TS affirmed semi-Pelagian views. Some of those online essays included appeals to the Second Council of Orange (529). The appeal to this council to support the accusation of semi-Pelagianism will be addressed in two ways.⁵ First, the decisions from the council will be compared to the TS. Second,

⁵See, as examples, Jeph, “My Response to ‘A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Under-

the thesis of an historical study of the fifth-century controversy will be considered. In both cases, it will be demonstrated that the decisions of the Second Council of Orange fail to indict the TS as unbiblical.

The decisions of the council compared to the Traditional Statement

At the outset, it is important to understand that the Second Council of Orange is not authoritative for Southern Baptists. The decisions of the council addressed differences between western and eastern theology on the exercise of the will in the context of monastic life (see the next section in this chapter) one millennia before the birth of the Baptist tradition. Even if the decisions at Orange were considered binding for Southern Baptists, then the question arises as to which decisions were violated by the TS and in what way? The decisions were finalized as a list of canons.⁶ In comparing the Canons of Orange to the TS, it will be demonstrated that there is both agreement and contradictions between the two documents. Further, the contradictions between the two documents are theological differences which result from the fidelity of the TS to the BFM. Below are five replies to this charge of semi-Pelagianism based on the Canons of Orange.

1.) Southern Baptists reject baptismal regeneration (salvation via water baptism). But baptismal regeneration was affirmed by this council. Canon 5 refers to “the regeneration of holy baptism.” Also, Canon 13 states: “The freedom of will that was destroyed in the first man can be restored only by the grace of baptism.” The Canons of Orange are not consistent with the BFM. For that reason alone, the council should be regarded as non-binding for Southern Baptists.

2.) Canon 4 requires an admission of the working of the Holy Spirit. Article 2 of the TS states: “(W)e deny that any sinner is saved apart from a free response to the Holy Spirit’s drawing through the Gospel.” That sentence clearly affirms the work of the Holy Spirit, who draws the sinner through the Gospel.

3.) Canon 5 denies that faith “belongs to us by nature and not by a gift of grace.” The TS makes no claim that faith belongs to us by nature. Rather, Article 4 states that by God’s grace,

standing of God’s Plan of Salvation,” June 2, 2012, <http://righteousbutnotyet.blogspot.com/2012/06/response-to-statement-of-traditional.html>; and Joe Carter, “The FAQ’s: Southern Baptists, Calvinists, and God’s Plan of Salvation,” June 6, 2012, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/06/06/the-faqs-southern-baptists-calvinism-and-gods-plan-of-salvation/>, who cites Chris Roberts, “Is the Statement Semi-Pelagian?” June 5, 2012, <http://sbcvoices.com/is-the-statement-semi-pelagian-by-chris-roberts/> (accessed December 19, 2013).

⁶The complete list of canons will not be listed in this chapter but can be accessed here: http://www.reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://www.reformed.org/documents/canons_of_orange.html (accessed September 8, 2012).

we are united “to Christ through the Holy Spirit by faith.” This means that a person’s union with Christ is by God’s grace (a gift) and through the Holy Spirit. These claims remove any idea that faith could “belong to us by nature.”

4.) Canon 6 affirms that God’s mercy is a gift of God’s grace. So does the TS. Consider Article 4 of the TS, “We affirm that grace is God’s generous decision to provide salvation for any person by taking all of the initiative in providing atonement.” Article 4 of the TS is clear that salvation is a gift of God’s grace and He takes the initiative in providing atonement.

5.) Canon 6 states, “(I)t is by the infusion and inspiration of the Holy Spirit within us that we have the faith, the will, or the strength to do all these things as we ought.” Canon 7 emphasizes this by stating that no one can be saved by “assent to the preaching of the gospel through our natural powers without the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.” The ministry of the Holy Spirit must be acknowledged in one’s understanding of a sinner’s regeneration. The TS repeatedly refers to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in bringing a sinner to repentance and faith in Christ. Consider these claims in the TS:

Article 2, “(W)e deny that any sinner is saved apart from a free response to the Holy Spirit’s drawing through the Gospel.”

Article 4, “We affirm that grace is God’s generous decision to provide salvation... in freely offering the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in uniting the believer to Christ through the Holy Spirit by faith.”

Article 5, “We affirm that any person who responds to the Gospel with repentance and faith is born again through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is a new creation in Christ and enters, at the moment he believes, into eternal life.”

Article 8, The call to salvation is made “by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.”

The TS clearly acknowledges the necessity of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the work of God to bring a sinner from death to life. It is unclear how a charge could be sustained that the TS teaches otherwise.

These comparisons demonstrate that it is neither helpful nor accurate to charge the TS with semi-Pelagianism based on the Canons of Orange. Next, the historical-theological context of fifth-century semi-Pelagianism will be considered to see if its views are consistent with the TS.

The historical-theological context of fifth-century semi-Pelagianism

Rebecca Harden Weaver published her Ph.D. dissertation through the North American Patristic Society under the title *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian*

Controversy. Weaver's careful historical-theological analysis makes a compelling case that the decisions of the Second Council of Orange (529) wrongly characterized the views of the opponents. In other words, the fifth-century semi-Pelagians did not teach the views they were accused of teaching. If this is the case, then this renders impotent any appeals to the Canons of Orange against the TS.⁷

The semi-Pelagians, whose views are best illustrated in the writings of John Cassian, understood salvation as the struggle for perfection within the monastic disciplines. Which group of Southern Baptists defines salvation in terms of eastern monasticism? None. The fifth-century, eastern monks questioned how God would judge and reward spiritual life apart from the exercise of the human will. The Augustinian reply (and the later decision by the Second Council of Orange) was a reply to this question about this monastic struggle for perfection, not a reply to contemporary Southern Baptists who differ over Calvinism.

Conclusion Regarding the Second Council of Orange

Contemporary Southern Baptists who view the Second Council of Orange as a model for discussing Calvinism within the SBC will be disappointed. First, the council affirmed baptismal regeneration (salvation via water baptism), which is inconsistent with the BFM. Second, the council did not resolve the question of whether certain people are predestined by God to salvation. Third, if Weaver is correct in her reconstruction of historical events, then the council addressed the semi-Pelagian view of the perfection of saints not the salvation of sinners. In those three ways, the canons against semi-Pelagianism do not apply to the TS.

An Early Assessment of the Traditional Statement

Less than one week after its public release, Roger Olson, professor of theology at Truett Seminary in Waco, Texas, commented on the TS. In the blog post, he made three errors before concluding that certain statements in Article 2 "can be interpreted in a semi-Pelagian way."⁸ First, he begins with a false premise which ends in a wrong conclusion. Second, Olson links the TS with people who deny an important claim which the TS affirms. Third, Olson wrongly regards the non-use of an Arminian phrase as a denial of divine initiative. Each of those errors will be detailed below. If Olson erred in his assessment of the TS, then his claim that the TS can be

⁷Rebecca Harden Weaver, *Divine Grace and Human Agency: A Study of the Semi-Pelagian Controversy*, Patristic Monograph Series 15 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996).

⁸Roger Olson, "Thoughts about 'A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation,'" June 4, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogerolson/2012/06/thoughts-about-a-statement-of-the-traditional-southern-baptist-understanding-of-gods-plan-of-salvation-/#comments> (accessed September 6, 2012). Olson concludes his article with this comment, which reveals his position on this issue prior to reading the TS: "For a long time I've been stating that most American Christians, including most Baptists, are semi-Pelagian, not Arminian and not merely non-Calvinist."

interpreted in a semi-Pelagian way should be considered inaccurate.

Beginning with a false premise leads to a wrong conclusion

Olson moves from a false premise to a wrong conclusion in order to charge the TS with semi-Pelagianism. First, he wrongly assumes that Southern Baptists are limited to only two biblical options for addressing the issues in Article 2: Calvinism and Arminianism. Next, Olson notes the failure in Article 2 to include two theological concepts which are used in debates between Calvinists and Arminians. Arminians acknowledge the bondage of the will and counter it with prevenient grace. Because Article 2 fails to acknowledge both the problem (bondage of the will) and the solution (prevenient grace), Article 2 should be regarded as neither Calvinist nor Arminian. Olson's error is that he regards the only other option to be semi-Pelagianism. Must one choose between Arminianism or Calvinism in order to affirm Christian views? According to Olson, yes.

Olson was wrong to require this Arminian-Calvinist theological grid. Article 2 failed to engage the bondage of the will because such a view belongs to a philosophical-theological system which obstructs a clear reading of Scripture.⁹ Such doctrines are neither helpful nor necessary for Article 2. The TS summarizes a biblical view of the impact of sin on people without importing the bondage of the will. How? Doctrinal statements which reject the Calvinist-Arminian framework are not obligated to employ doctrines belonging uniquely to that system, such as bondage of the will. It is not enough to argue that the TS fails to employ the terms bondage of the will and prevenient grace. In order to make a case against the TS as unbiblical, it must be demonstrated that the views are *required* by the words of the Bible. Olson did not attempt to make such a case.

Olson's false premise is that the TS, a distinctively Southern Baptist doctrinal statement, must employ an Arminian doctrine (prevenient grace) to answer a doctrine belonging to Calvinist-Arminian debates on the will. Otherwise, he wrongly concludes, the Southern Baptist document is semi-Pelagian. Advocates of the TS reject the notion that Baptists must borrow from Arminians to defend against Calvinists.

⁹For more on this view, see David Allen, Ken Keathley, et al, "Neither Calvinists nor Arminians but Baptists." White Paper 36 (September 2010), http://www.baptistcenter.net/papers/Neither_Calvinists_Nor_Arminians_But_Baptists.pdf (accessed September 3, 2012); and Eric Hankins, "Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: Toward a Baptist Soteriology" *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 8.1 (Spring 2011): 87–100, available at http://baptistcenter.net/journals/JBTM_8-1_Spring_2011.pdf#page=90 (accessed December 19, 2013).

Wrongly linking the TS with people who deny an important claim which the TS affirms

Olson links the TS with people who deny divine initiative in salvation, but the TS explicitly affirms divine initiative. In his blog article, Olson writes,

(T)he statement's mention of "the Holy Spirit's drawing through the Gospel" ... can be interpreted in a semi-Pelagian way. Semi-Pelagians such as Philip Limborch and (at least in some of his writings) Charles Finney affirmed the necessity of the gospel and the Holy Spirit's enlightening work through it for salvation. What made them semi-Pelagian was their denial or neglect of the divine initiative in salvation (except the gospel message).¹⁰

Olson claims that "the Holy Spirit's work of drawing sinners to salvation through the Gospel ... can be interpreted in a semi-Pelagian way." How so? Olson explains that Limborch and Finney, whom he labels as semi-Pelagians, affirmed the need for the Holy Spirit and the gospel. At this point, Olson has only established that any doctrinal statement which affirms the need for the Holy Spirit to use the gospel in order for sinners to be converted should be regarded as semi-Pelagian. That would include both the TS and the BFM. But Olson continues, "What made them semi-Pelagian" It is unclear to whom was Olson referring. Olson is probably referring not to advocates of the TS but to Limborch and Finney. Thus, "What made [Limborch and Finney] semi-Pelagian was their denial or neglect of divine initiative in salvation." Even so, Olson implies that if the TS denies or neglects divine initiative, then it should be regarded as semi-Pelagian. But the TS *affirms* divine initiative in salvation. In that way, the TS is innocent of Olson's charge.

Wrongly regarding the non-use of an Arminian phrase as a denial of divine initiative

In his blog post on Article 2, Olson writes,

The problem with this Southern Baptist statement is its neglect of emphasis on the necessity of the prevenience of supernatural grace for the exercise of a good will toward God (including acceptance of the gospel by faith). If the authors believe in that cardinal biblical truth, they need to spell it out more clearly. And they need to delete the sentence that denies the incapacitation of free will due to Adam's sin.

Leaving the statement as it stands, without a clear affirmation of the bondage of the will to sin apart from supernatural grace, inevitably hands the Calvinists ammunition to use against non-Calvinist Baptists.¹¹

¹⁰Olson, "Thoughts."

¹¹Ibid.

Olson identifies “(t)he problem with this Southern Baptist Statement” as “its neglect of emphasis on the necessity of prevenience of supernatural grace (...).” Previously, Olson noted the problem with Limborch and Finney was their “denial or neglect of the divine initiative in salvation.” Olson has not established that the TS denies or neglects divine initiative in salvation. But Olson apparently thinks this is the case since the TS does not mention “the prevenience of supernatural grace.”

It is true that the TS does not use this Arminian phrase “prevenience of supernatural grace.” But any concern that Article 2 neglects an emphasis on God’s grace should be assuaged by the following declarations in the Statement:

“...no sinner is saved apart from a free response to the Holy Spirit’s drawing through the Gospel.”
- Article 2, sentence 4

“We affirm that grace is God’s generous decision to provide salvation for any person by taking all of the initiative in providing atonement...” - Article 4, sentence 1

The language of the TS comforts neither Calvinists nor Arminians because Article 2 fails to mention either the bondage of the will or prevenient grace. The reason the theological language of Calvinism and Arminianism is not employed is simple. The TS describes the theology of Southern Baptists who identify with neither of those theological systems.

Olson’s dedicated and intense study of the Calvinist-Arminian framework over a prolonged period of time has resulted in both help and hindrance. The help is found in Olson’s recent books. One is a masterful explanation of Arminianism. The other is a devastating critique of Calvinism. These books are outstanding.¹² Unfortunately, the help is accompanied by a hindrance. Olson now places all doctrinal blocks into one of only three holes: Calvinism, Arminianism, and Unbiblical. Because the preamble of the TS explains it was prompted by the rising influence of Calvinism within the SBC, Olson skipped the Calvinism hole. Next, he tried to fit the TS into the Arminian hole. When the TS mentioned neither the bondage of the will nor prevenient grace, Olson knew it wouldn’t fit in the Arminian hole. Olson reasoned the TS must fit into the third hole. But, as argued above, that would only be the case if one accepts the premise that there are only three options: Calvinism, Arminianism, and Unbiblical. The TS reflects a fourth option, Southern Baptist theology which maintains faithfulness to the Bible but disregards certain commitments of both Calvinism and Arminianism.

Summary

The claim made by Olson was then echoed by an SBC Seminary President, who wrote that

¹²Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Reality* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006); *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

the TS appears to affirm semi-Pelagianism.¹³ This chapter attempted to disprove the charge in four ways. First, standard definitions of semi-Pelagianism were provided which are contradicted by claims in the TS. Second, the decisions of the Second Council of Orange fail to indict the TS as unbiblical. Third, the historical-theological context of the fifth-century debate suggests no connection to the current discussion regarding the TS. Fourth, particular errors were exposed in an early assessment of the TS.

The aim of this chapter has been to defeat a false charge. It has been demonstrated in several ways that the TS does not affirm semi-Pelagianism. Perhaps those who were accused of semi-Pelagianism for affirming the Traditional Statement will one day be exonerated like those who were wrongly accused of Communism in the 1950s.

¹³Two days after Olson's article was posted online, R. Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, commented on the TS in an article on his blog, "Some portions of the statement actually go beyond Arminianism and appear to affirm semi-Pelagian understandings of sin, human nature, and the human will—understandings that virtually all Southern Baptists have denied." See R. Albert Mohler, "Southern Baptists and Salvation: It's Time to Talk," June 6, 2012, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2012/06/06/southern-baptists-and-salvation-its-time-to-talk/> (accessed September 9, 2012). Mohler offered no support for his claim. At the time of this writing, he has neither rescinded nor repeated the charge.

Five Theological Models Relating Determinism, Divine Sovereignty, and Human Freedom



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Several of the statements in “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation” involve the interrelation of divine sovereignty and human freedom. This question is addressed in several articles of this commentary on the “Statement,” but this article provides an overview of different perspectives on this important subject. Although there is a broad spectrum of views on this question, there are five basic perspectives held by evangelicals to describe the relationship of divine sovereignty to human freedom – hard determinism, soft determinism, Molinism, soft libertarian freedom, and strong libertarian freedom. This article seeks to survey each of these perspectives, particularly because each of them has its own vocabulary that can be confusing or misunderstood. These topics are controversial, and are discussed in many settings, both in person and online. All Christians should be able to articulate where they stand on this important subject. It is very important for church leaders to understand these terms and be able to discuss them intelligently. I will also provide some commentary on the viability of each of these models from a traditional Baptist perspective.

Hard Determinism/Causal Determinism -- The strongest challenge to personal human freedom is *hard determinism* or *causal determinism*, the view that everything we are and do is determined or caused by prior events. So, though we think that we have a choice in what we eat for lunch or whom we marry, in fact we are deceived. These apparent choices are but an illusion. We had no choice but to eat a particular lunch or marry a particular person – it was imbedded in our DNA or brain cells. In fact, all of what we call “choices” are just an illusion – everything is determined by prior events and causes. Determinism is popular among many materialists, New Atheists, and postmodernists because it portrays the world as a closed system in which everything is completely determined by natural causes. For example, note how postmodernist thinker Richard Rorty’s determinism is expressed in his view of the radical contingency with which each person’s life is shaped by previous events and causes: “Our language and our culture are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids.”¹ So, for Rorty, “for all we know, or should care, Aristotle’s metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul’s metaphorical use of *agape*, and Newton’s

¹Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 16.

metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy—some obsessional kinks left in these brains by idiosyncratic traumata.”²

In a Christian reading of hard determinism, however, it is not physical causes but God’s decrees which determine everything that happens. Not many evangelicals endorse this (hard) theological determinism, but some such as Paul Helm, Paul Helseth, and John Feinberg are willing to insist that God ordains all things that happen in order to assure a perspective that God is totally in control of the universe, even at the most detailed level.³ So, again, in hard determinism we have no real choices; everything is predetermined and caused by prior events, and in a Christian hard determinism, God ordains everything that happens; we really have no choice or freedom.

Soft Determinism/Compatibilism -- Hard determinism is so out of touch with our own experience of life, however, that many feel that it does not give an adequate account of human freedom. This problem has led to the affirmation by many of *soft determinism* or *compatibilism*, which asserts that freedom is in some sense compatible with determinism.⁴

Having defined what compatibilism *is*, we must also note what it is *not*. Unfortunately, some theologians have profoundly confused what compatibilism is, and this confusion greatly muddles the discussion of this topic. They have described “compatibilism” not as the compatibility of determinism and human freedom, but the compatibility of divine sovereignty with human freedom.⁵ However, the compatibility of God’s sovereignty and human freedom is

²Ibid., 17.

³Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994); idem, “Classical Calvinist Doctrine of God,” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*, ed. Bruce Ware (Nashville: Broadman and Holman), 5–75; Paul Kjos Helseth, “God Causes All Things,” in *Four Views of Divine Providence*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 25–77; John Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), chap. 14, 677–776; and idem, “God Ordains All Things,” in *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty*, ed. David and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986), 17–60. Feinberg’s view is more nuanced than Helm’s, and at points he could also be described as advocating the “compatibilist” view, but fundamentally, as the title of his article in the Basinger multiviews book suggests, he affirms that “God ordains all things.”

⁴*Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Free Will”; *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Free Will”; *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “Free Will”; *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “Free Will”; *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Determinism and Freedom”; *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, s.v. “Compatibilism”; *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, online at <http://plato.stanford.edu/search/searcher.py>, s.v. “Compatibilism” and “Arguments for Incompatibilism” (accessed October 27, 2009).

⁵For examples of this confusion, see D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 200–204; Bruce Ware, *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 73–85, and in “A Modified Calvinist Doctrine of God” in *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God*, 98–99. Paul Helm points out Ware’s inconsistent use of these terms in *Perspectives*, 44. An example of a compatibilist who avoids these confusions is John Feinberg in *No One Like Him*, 635–9.

noncontroversial. Even an open theist, an Arminian, or a Pelagian would affirm the compatibility of human freedom with divine sovereignty. Nor does “compatibilism” refer to the compatibility of human freedom with God’s will. Again, even an open theist, an Arminian, or a Pelagian would affirm the compatibility of human freedom and some sense of God’s will. So the compatibility of God’s sovereignty and/or God’s will with human freedom is not at issue. The issue is whether or not Christianity is compatible with hard determinism, or whether God exercises His sovereignty in such a way that allows for meaningful human freedom.

Genuine compatibilists, then, believe that human freedom can be reconciled with determinism in some way. However, they do so only at a great price – what they call “compatibilist freedom” is not what we normally mean when we use the word “freedom.” By “compatibilist freedom,” the soft determinist says that we always act according to our greatest desire. In other words, we are always ruled by desire. We never make a choice between two options, but we do what we do willingly because we are ruled by desire.

In a Calvinist account of compatibilism developed by Jonathan Edwards,⁶ divine determinism is compatible with humans doing things by their own volition. In Edwards’ view, our wills are so dominated by our sinful natures that we are incapable of doing anything but our greatest desire. We never really have a choice – we are sinful from birth due to the inherited guilt of original sin. And yet, people are held accountable for their sins despite the fact that they never had a choice because they participated in their sins willingly. In salvation, God changes our wills and desires through irresistible enabling grace as the Holy Spirit regenerates our spiritual life. However, this enabling grace is given only to those whom God has already predestined and elected; the majority of the human race will never have this opportunity to respond to God. The elect then genuinely desire to trust Christ. We do so willingly, even though we did not have the ability to choose or do anything else. Again, compatibilist “freedom” is not really “freedom” at all – it is *voluntary* but not *free*. Just being willing to do something does not mean that a person is free. If you were being robbed at gunpoint, you might be willing to hand over your wallet to the robber, but your decision is not really free because you have no real choice. To truly be free, there must be a choice between at least two alternatives.

All Traditional Baptists would agree that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23, 5:12–18, Isa 53:6), that there are none who are righteous (Isa 64:6, Jer 17:9, Rom 3:10), and that we have depraved sinful natures (Jer 17:9). However, most Traditional Baptists do not agree that persons inherit guilt for sin. As the *Baptist Faith and Message* affirms:

Through the temptation of Satan man transgressed the command of God, and fell from his original innocence whereby his posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin. Therefore,

⁶For Edwards’s argument for compatibilism, see Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (New York: Cosimo, 2007). Among other Reformed thinkers, John Piper adopted Edwards’s view most closely. See John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998).

as soon as they are capable of moral action, they become transgressors and are under condemnation.⁷

So although we inherit a nature and environment *inclined* toward sin, we do not actually become guilty of sin until we *choose* to do so ourselves after we reach the age to be accountable for our moral actions. The *Baptist Faith and Message* (BFM) 2000 insists that we have the ability to make a *choice* to respond to God's invitation to salvation through Christ. It affirms that divine election is "consistent with the free agency of man,"⁸ and that salvation is "*offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.*"⁹

Compatibilism presents a rather negative view of human nature in which not only are all persons seen as spiritually depraved sinners (a point with which almost all evangelical Christians would agree), but we are never able to rise above mere desire to dream or aspire to things which transcend desire. While we are not conscious of being "forced" to do something, in fact we are not free to do anything but what we have been programmed to do. Since it is our greatest desire we do it willingly, but our minds can never override desire -- we really have no choice. Therefore, compatibilism really does not qualify as a variety of "freedom," since freedom requires the ability to choose between alternatives. In compatibilism, we act willingly according to our greatest desire, but we do not choose freely.

Molinism/Middle Knowledge – Another proposed solution to the dilemma of freewill and determinism was proposed by Luis de Molina in the sixteenth century, and has gained popularity among many evangelical scholars in the last few decades.¹⁰ Molinism affords a conceptual framework in which both God chooses everything that happens and humans have genuine freedom. Although space does not permit a more thorough discussion of Molinism, let us delineate in brief several aspects of God's knowledge which are fundamental to this perspective. God knows not only all the myriad possibilities of what *could* happen (His "*natural knowledge*"), but He also conceives (by His own omniscience, not by His perception of future human choices)

⁷BFM 2000, Article 3 ("Man").

⁸BFM 2000, Article 5 ("God's Purpose of Grace").

⁹BFM 2000, Article 4 ("Salvation").

¹⁰For more details on Molinism, see Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*; William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); idem, "The Middle Knowledge View" in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. J. K. Beilby and P. R. Eddy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 125–36; idem, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation through Christ," *Faith and Philosophy* 6:2 (April 1989): 172–88; Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). Some infralapsarian Calvinists have applied some insights from Molinism to their view of divine permission. See Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 289–364; and idem, "Why Calvinists Should Believe in Divine Middle Knowledge, Although They Reject Molinism," in *Westminster Journal of Theology* 69 (2007): 345–66. Tiessen clearly identifies himself as a middle knowledge Calvinist, and finds Molinist beliefs in Calvinists such as Bruce Ware and John Frame.

what persons *would* actually do in every possible situation (His “*middle knowledge*”). Based upon His natural knowledge and middle knowledge of all the “possible worlds” (i.e., each different future series of events in which there is at least one choice that is different from all the other series of events), God actualizes the possible world of free human choices that He desires (His “*free knowledge*”).¹¹ Molinism thus allows for both genuinely free human choices and God determining which possible world He desires. As one might expect of a view that attempts to take a middle position between two extremes, Molinism has faced criticism from both Calvinists and those affirming a high view of human freedom.

Calvinists challenge the notion that God can foreknow the genuinely free decisions (with libertarian freedom, not just compatibilist volition) of human beings.¹² Persons from a libertarian freedom perspective challenge whether persons are genuinely free if God has predetermined the one future world in which they functionally have no choice, since God has determined to actualize this particular possible world in which they cannot make any different choices than what God has chosen. Some Traditional Baptists and other conservative evangelicals have found Molinism a good compromise in expressing the tension between divine foreknowledge and human freedom, but it is still a minority perspective.

Decisionism/Congruentism/Soft Libertarian Freedom – While the somewhat technical term “soft libertarian freedom” is unfamiliar to many people, it is a commonsense view broadly held by many people, as well as nationally known philosophers and theologians. “Libertarian freedom” simply means that in every key decision we have a choice between at least two alternatives, even if the only alternatives are “yes” or “no.” It may be labeled “decisionism” in that we always have a choice, a decision. It is named *soft* libertarian freedom in order to distinguish it from any who would hold to absolute or total freedom.¹³ In soft libertarianism, limited choices are available in almost every aspect. While our decisions are not *determined* by prior causes and events, our

¹¹For an excellent discussion of these three moments in God’s knowledge in Molinism, see Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 39–41.

¹²This challenge is often described as the “grounding objection.” Molinists have provided thoughtful responses to this challenge, but these discussions go beyond the subject of this article.

¹³For more discussion of the soft libertarian perspective, see Steve Lemke, “Agent Causation, or How to Be a Soft Libertarian,” available online at <http://preview.tinyurl.com/jw5hsep>; idem, “Agent Causation and Moral Accountability: A Proposal of the Criteria for Moral Responsibility,” available online at <http://preview.tinyurl.com/k93bm38>; Alfred Mele, “Soft Libertarianism and the Flickers of Freedom,” in *Moral Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities: Essays on the Importance of Alternative Possibilities*, ed. David Widerker and Michael McKenna (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 251–64; idem, *Free Will and Luck* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 69–100; Hugh J. McCann, *The Works of Agency: on Human Action, Will, and Freedom* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Timothy O’Connor, *Persons and Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); idem., *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and idem, *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

decisions are definitely *impacted* by forces outside ourselves. We don't make decisions in a vacuum – we often face profound pressures which weigh heavily on our choices. However, at the end of the day, we are still able to decide freely. In Leibniz's famous phrase, prior events "incline without necessitating" our decisions – they powerfully impact our choices without determining them.¹⁴

Soft libertarianism affords at least two significant advantages over determinism and soft determinism:

(a) Soft libertarianism squares with our experience of decision making in real life. As we make decisions, we believe that we are genuinely making a decision between real alternatives, not just doing what we most desire. Most of us picture our decision making as being like a president and his cabinet of advisors. The advisors may argue with each other about what choice should be made, just as our emotions, desires, and rational judgment may cry out for us to act in a particular way. In the end, however, it is the president who decides what will be done. Likewise, in our own lives, though our desires are a powerful force, it is the *self* or *person* who decides what we will do, not just our desires.

(b) Do we always do what we desire the most, as compatibilism claims? In fact, we often do what we do not want to do. As Paul confesses in Rom 7:15–16, we sometimes do what we do not want to do, and at other times we do not do the good things that we desire to do.

How then does a decisionist or soft libertarian view interact with determinism? Soft libertarianism rejects hard or causal determinism, and thus is sometimes described as *indeterminism*.¹⁵ Soft libertarianism also denies that human freedom is compatible with determinism, so it is described as *incompatibilism*. However, soft libertarianism is compatible with God's will and sovereignty, since both are affirmed in Scripture. Divine sovereignty and human freedom must be held in tension, or what might be described as *congruentism*. Just how human freedom and divine sovereignty are reconciled is bound up in God's transcendence over our finite lives. Most Traditional Baptists simply note that the Bible affirms both a high view of divine sovereignty and of human freedom, and thus these two scriptural truths must be held in tension in the realm of *mystery*. Although they may not be familiar with technical language such as "soft libertarian freedom," most Traditional Baptists believe in a perspective such as this that maintains the scriptural tension between strong divine sovereignty and genuine libertarian human freedom.

¹⁴G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, sec. 336, in *Schriften*, 6.314. He used a similar phrase in his letter to Clarke, letter 5, sec. 8, in *Schriften*, 6.390.

¹⁵By "indeterminism," I mean only that what we do is not necessarily determined by prior events or causes, but may be chosen by a personal free agent. It does *not* mean that events are uncaused or random, but that free moral agents can originate a decision by choosing options that were not causally determined by other factors.

Strong Libertarian Freedom/Self-Determination—While soft libertarianism advocates a creaturely freedom that takes into account the limitations of human existence and the powerful forces that bear down on our decisions, a “hard” or “strong” view of libertarian freedom accords a more unfettered version of freedom. Often associated with Openness of God theology, this view asserts that God does not know with certainty the future decisions of persons.¹⁶ Therefore, although God can predict the future with a high degree of probability due to his immense knowledge, He cannot know with certainty what humans will do. As noted in the earlier discussion in this article on omniscience, the BFM 2000 and most evangelical Christians understand Scripture to deny this view because it portrays God’s omniscience and foreknowledge of future human choices as limited.

What is the right perspective on these issues? I affirm the soft libertarian/decisionist perspective, and I explained my reasons why in the article. However, this is a question that you must search the Scriptures for yourself and determine your own perspective on these important issues.

¹⁶Representative presentations of Openness of God theology can be found in Greg A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994); idem, *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998).

On the “Traditionalist Statement”: Some Friendly Reflections from a Calvinistic Southern Baptist



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When the “Traditionalist Statement” was published in May 2012, I confess I had mixed feelings about the document.¹ On the one hand, I believe that confessional statements (and similar documents) are helpful tools for various groups of Baptists to more clearly communicate their convictions. This is especially important in a tradition that has never been defined by a single, authoritative confession along the lines of the Westminster Confession of Faith for Presbyterians or the Augsburg Confession for Lutherans. Furthermore, there is little doubt that the nature of soteriology is an area in desperate need of clear communication by Southern Baptists on all sides of this discussion. I am grateful to Eric Hankins and others who drafted, signed, and promoted the Traditionalist Statement. We need more documents like this, not less.

On the other hand, I had several concerns about the Traditionalist Statement. For starters, I disagreed with some of the positions put forward in the document. If the vision set forth in this manifesto represents a traditional Southern Baptist view of soteriology, then I am definitely not a traditional Southern Baptist; this is a somewhat depressing thought for one who spends much of his time studying and teaching others about Southern Baptist history. Second, I was concerned about the widely circulated rumor that some of the signatories of the Traditionalist Statement wanted the SBC to formally adopt the statement as some sort of litmus test for our agencies and boards. Whether this was merely a blogosphere conspiracy or whether there was at least tentative talk of a litmus test is still very much in dispute, depending upon whom you ask. Third, I was disappointed at some of the rancor that was displayed by folks on both sides of the debate, especially on the internet. The polemical heat did not seem to bode well for Southern Baptist unity.² Finally, I feared that the Traditionalist Statement would provide an occasion for

¹The full title of the document is “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation.” It was published at the blog SBC Today, available online at <http://sbctoday.com/2012/05/30/an-introduction-to-%E2%80%9Ca-statement-of-the-traditional-southern-baptist-understanding-of-god%E2%80%99s-plan-of-salvation%E2%80%9D/> (accessed September 6, 2013).

²I was pleased at how Executive Committee President Frank Page brought together representatives from both perspectives to craft a winsome consensus statement. While real differences remain, it seems the document drafted by Page’s committee has helped bring about a more mature and Christ-like tone to the discussion. See “TRUTH, TRUST, and TESTIMONY IN A TIME OF TENSION,” *SBC Life* (June–August, 2013), available online at <http://>

distraction from our primary task as Southern Baptists: cooperating together to play our part in fulfilling the Great Commission.³

I have been asked to offer some friendly reflections on the Traditionalist Statement from the perspective of a Calvinistic Southern Baptist.⁴ Because of my understanding of soteriology, I disagree with most of the affirmations and denials in the Traditionalist Statement. I have a different understanding of the relationship between Adam's original sin and subsequent human sin, the nature of free will, the meaning of election, the intent of the atonement, and the efficaciousness of grace. I would also nuance the section on the gospel differently than the Traditionalist Statement. While I agree that all people are "capable of responding" to the good news, I also believe that sin has so blinded humanity that nobody will choose to believe the gospel without the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit. I have no qualms with the words in the articles on eternal security and the Great Commission, though I recognize I bring different theological assumptions to these articles than the framers of the Traditionalist Statement.⁵ I could not sign the Traditionalist Statement in good conscience because I do not believe it accurately summarizes the biblical understanding of salvation.

As a Calvinistic Southern Baptist, I respectfully disagree with the soteriological convictions held by my Traditionalist brothers and sisters in Christ. I see no need to say much further on this point. Rather, in this short essay, I will focus my reflections on the document's Preamble, since this section speaks more to the occasion for and potential uses of the Traditionalist Statement. I share these thoughts out of a sincere desire to see better understanding, closer cooperation, and a greater sense of spiritual unity among Southern Baptists with differing opinions about election, the intent of the atonement, and the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation. As I wrote in a previous essay,

www.sbclife.org/Articles/2013/06/sla5.asp (accessed September 6, 2013).

³On the latter point, I helped to draft a response to the Traditionalist Statement by the contributors to *Between the Times*, the faculty blog of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. See "A Statement of the Traditional Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation: A Brief Response," *Between the Times* (May 31, 2012), available online at <http://betweenthetimes.com/index.php/2012/05/31/a-statement-of-the-traditional-baptist-understanding-of-gods-plan-of-salvation-a-brief-response/> (accessed October 21, 2013).

⁴When asked to clarify my views, I describe myself as an evangelical Calvinist. As an evangelical Calvinist, I combine an evangelical understanding of conversion and mission with a Calvinistic understanding of soteriology. Earlier generations of Baptists described views like mine as "Fullerite," after the famous English Baptist pastor-theologian Andrew Fuller. For more on Fuller and "Fullerism," see Peter J. Morden, *Offering Christ to the World: Andrew Fuller (1754–1815) and the Revival of Eighteenth Century Particular Baptist Life*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 8 (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK, and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003), and Paul Brewster, *Andrew Fuller: Model Pastor-Theologian*, Studies in Baptist Life and Thought (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010). My use of the Calvinist label should not be construed as my approbation of Reformed pedobaptist understandings of ecclesiology, the sacraments, or the relationship between church and state.

⁵I offer this qualification because I respect the principle of authorial intent when it comes to interpreting confessions of faith. This means I recognize that the words of a confessional statement must be interpreted in light of its framers; I am not free to interpret their statement according to my own understanding. This seems to be the position that has the most interpretive integrity and shows neighbor love to the framers of a confession of faith.

The Calvinism issue is not going to go away, so Southern Baptists must be willing to discuss and debate openly the doctrines of grace in an effort to be biblically accurate and perhaps come to a greater theological consensus in the years to come. If we are to move toward a more cooperative future, we must all be committed to defending and commending our particular convictions, but not at the expense of either our cooperation with one another or our personal sanctification.⁶

It is in this spirit that I engage with the Traditionalist Statement's Preamble. I want to pose two questions to those who helped draft the Traditionalist Statement or who resonated enough with the document to affix their signatures to it during the summer of 2012.⁷ I hope my Traditionalist friends will receive these questions in the spirit they are being asked.

What Makes Traditionalists Traditional?

Like many observers, I confess I was a bit confused that the authors and early signatories of the document in question chose to call their views "traditional" and identified themselves as "Traditionalists." I have a theory about this approach, which may or may not be true (please correct me if I am missing something). I think that Traditionalists are upset that many Calvinists, especially those who identify with the Founders movement, frequently point out that most nineteenth-century Southern Baptists were Calvinistic in their soteriology.⁸ Founders Ministries has long argued that they are "committed to historic Baptist principles," implying their views are more or less equivalent to the views of the founding generation of Southern Baptists.⁹ Hence, to combat a "Founders-esque" reading of Southern Baptist historical theology, some non-Calvinists have chosen to identify their views as traditional Southern Baptist soteriology. If this is the case—and I can see no other reason why this label would have been chosen—I believe it is ultimately unhelpful, for reasons related to both history and strategy.

First, there is the historical problem. Like it or not, Southern Baptists in the middle decades of the nineteenth century were far more Calvinistic than they had become by the early twentieth century. This does not mean Southern Baptists were uniformly Calvinist—if by Calvinist one means strict adherence to all "five points."¹⁰ For example, it is clear that the founding generation

⁶Nathan A. Finn, "Southern Baptist Calvinism: Setting the Record Straight," in *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 192.

⁷Before the list of signatories was taken down in July 2012, the Traditionalist Statement had garnered over 800 endorsements, including six former SBC presidents and two sitting seminary presidents. See "Framers of TS Remove Signatory List," SBC Today (July 14, 2012), available online at <http://sbctoday.com/2012/07/14/framers-of-ts-remove-signatory-list/#more-8906> (accessed October 21, 2013). The signatories list was subsequently posted and is available online at <http://connect316.net/signers> (accessed November 28, 2013).

⁸The most important work along these lines is Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006).

⁹See the masthead at the Founders Ministries website (<http://www.founders.org/>).

¹⁰For what it is worth, I push back against the tendency among contemporary Southern Baptists to equate "Calvinism" with strict adherence to all five points associated with the Canons of Dort. This is problematic for at least two

of Southern Baptists were debating the intent of the atonement, with some holding to more “limited/particular” understandings and others holding to more “general/unlimited” views. It is also clear, however, that there was minimal debate concerning the doctrines of election or perseverance.¹¹ The starting point for early Southern Baptist soteriology was reflected in confessions such as the strictly Calvinistic Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742), which was affirmed by most of the men who attended the foundational meeting of the SBC in 1845, and the broadly Calvinistic New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833; revised 1853) and Abstract of Principles (1858).¹²

Some scholars such as David Dockery and Richard Land argue Southern Baptist leaders were more Calvinistic, but grassroots church members were less so.¹³ While this seems intuitive, to my knowledge no one has been able to document this conjecture based upon a careful study of nineteenth-century primary sources. Pastors, educators, and editors—in other words, the types of people who leave behind primary source materials—were at least broadly Calvinistic for the first two generations of Southern Baptist history. This can be established through even a casual perusal of church confessions, associational minutes (especially circular letters), books, periodical articles, and letters written to the editors of state Baptist papers. Everything else is speculation. Even if Dockery and Land are correct, the fact remains that Southern Baptist clergy and other strategic denominational leaders were in a different place theologically than contemporary Traditionalists.

Second, there is the strategic disadvantage. In a debate among Baptists, historical theology, while interesting and informative, is not decisive. To say it another way, it really does not matter

reasons. First, Dort has only been summarized according to the five-pointed “Tulip” for about a century. See Kenneth Stewart, “The Points of Calvinism: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 26.2 (2008): 187–203. Second, Calvinists in a variety of denominational traditions have debated the intent of the atonement and the relationship between regeneration and faith since the Reformation era. While there may be any number of understandable reasons to reject the Calvinist label, from a historical theological standpoint, a non-Catholic who affirms total depravity, unconditional election, and the perseverance of the saints holds to a basically Calvinistic soteriology. For a helpful discussion of Reformed debates about the atonement in particular, see G. Michael Thomas, *The Extent of the Atonement: A Dilemma for Reformed Theology from Calvin to the Consensus (1536–1675)* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 1997).

¹¹In his history of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Greg Wills does a fine job of showing how the framers of the Abstract of Principles crafted the confession to accommodate various Southern Baptist perspectives on soteriology. See Gregory A. Wills, *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1859–2009* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31–40.

¹²According to Timothy George, “it was unnecessary for the nascent Convention to adopt a specific theological standard because of the overwhelming doctrinal consensus which prevailed among the messengers, most of which belonged to congregations which adhered to the *Philadelphia Confession of Faith*, an American adaptation of the 1689 *Second London Confession*.” See Timothy George, “The Priesthood of All Believers,” in *The People of God: Essays on the Believer’s Church*, ed. Paul Basden and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 88.

¹³See David S. Dockery, “Southern Baptists and Calvinism: A Historical Look,” in *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue*, 35, and Richard Land, “Congruent Election: Understanding Salvation from an ‘Eternal Now’ Perspective,” in *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism*, eds. David L. Allen and Steve W. Lemke (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 46–50.

what earlier generations of Baptists believed; what ultimately matters is what contemporary Baptists believe the Bible to teach concerning soteriology. For Southern Baptists, Scripture is the supreme authority for faith and practice. Baptist historical theology can be a helpful conversation partner in contemporary biblical interpretation, but it is not a hermeneutic in and of itself. I am convinced my Traditionalist friends actually agree with me on this point. In fact, it seems to me that the main argument that Traditionalists are trying to make is that the “vast majority” of modern Southern Baptists holds to their beliefs, which is certainly possible. But the name Traditionalist implies historical lineage, and it simply is not true that Traditionalists hold to historic Southern Baptist soteriology. At best, some of their views have been held by a majority of Southern Baptists since the early years of the twentieth century; others are of more recent vintage.¹⁴

At the end of the day, the Traditionalist moniker raises too many questions to be useful. Unfortunately, the descriptor “mainstream,” while making the larger point of the Traditionalists, is problematic because of the way some many Baptists have embraced it. “Majoritarian,” another possible descriptor, seems too political, especially in a mostly democratic network of churches. Some non-Calvinists have opted to simply describe their views as “Baptist,” but this is even less helpful because the Baptist name offers no clarity as to one’s soteriology, at least when it comes to this particular discussion.¹⁵ I understand the desire for Traditionalists to find a way to describe their views without making Calvinism the standard against which their positions are compared. Every group of believers deserves the chance to define their views on their own terms. But Traditionalist Baptists is too problematic a name, so I would urge my friends in this camp to find a more helpful label for their views.

Who Are the New Calvinists and What Have They Done?

In the preamble to the Traditionalist Statement, the authors claim that some “New Calvinists” have pushed for a “radical alteration” of the “longstanding arrangement” wherein Calvinists and non-Calvinists cooperate together in the SBC without too much trouble. However, as best as I can tell, the document never clarifies who the New Calvinists are and what they are doing to undermine SBC unity. The term New Calvinism has been in use since Collin Hansen wrote

¹⁴For example, the Traditionalist Statement’s section on human sinfulness sounds similar to the 1963 and 2000 versions of the Baptist Faith and Message, but sounds very different than the 1925 Baptist Faith and Message and the earlier New Hampshire Confession upon which it was based. For a comparison of all three versions of the Baptist Faith and Message, see the Southern Baptist Convention’s website, available at <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfmcomparison.asp> (accessed October 21, 2013).

¹⁵See Eric Hankins, “Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: Toward a Baptist Soteriology,” *Journal of Baptist Theology and Ministry* 8.1 (Spring 2011): 87–100, and “Neither Calvinists nor Arminians but Baptists,” (September 2010), White Paper 36, Center for Theological Research, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, available online at <http://www.baptisttheology.org/baptisttheology/assets/File/NeitherCalvinistsNorArminiansButBaptists.pdf> (accessed November 29, 2013). The authors of the latter document include David Allen, Kenneth Keathley, Richard Land, Steve Lemke, Paige Patterson, Jerry Vines, and Malcolm Yarnell. The problem with this particular approach is that being Baptist has absolutely no bearing whatsoever on the Calvinism or Arminian debate, since Baptists have historically been all over the map on this issue.

his 2008 book *Young, Restless, and Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists*.¹⁶ However, what is interesting about Hansen's New Calvinism is that it is far more diverse than the New Calvinism that seems to concern the Southern Baptist Traditionalists. Hansen's group includes movements that are not explicitly Calvinistic (e.g. Passion), pastors who are leading advocates of global missions (e.g. John Piper), and leaders who demur on the doctrine of limited atonement (e.g. Mark Driscoll). Yet, the Traditionalist Statement goes out of its way to mention "unacceptable conclusions" such as "anti-missionism, hyper-Calvinism, double predestination, limited atonement, etc." Apparently, the problematic New Calvinists of the SBC are not the same group as the more theologically diverse, missions-minded New Calvinists one finds in such pan-evangelical groups as Together for the Gospel and The Gospel Coalition.

Even if the Traditionalist Statement had pointed to a particular group of SBC Calvinists and outed them as the newfangled, unacceptable kind of Calvinist, the authors do not tell us what it is that the New Calvinists are doing that has so upset the Southern Baptist apple cart. Are they advocating anti-missionism and hyper-Calvinism? I find this highly doubtful. Anti-mission views, which have been held by diverse groups of Baptists who were by no means exclusively or even primarily Calvinistic, were only ever championed in explicitly Southern Baptist circles among some Landmark leaders in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁷ As for hyper-Calvinism, the Primitive Baptists, who separated from mainstream Baptists before the SBC was even formed in 1845, are the only group that has maintained those views. So the Traditionalists cannot mean the New Calvinists have advocated anti-missionism or hyper-Calvinism, at least as those terms are normally understood by historians and theologians.

Perhaps the New Calvinists have been advocating double predestination and limited atonement, since the Preamble also mentions these views? If this is the case, I wonder what makes this situation so abhorrent that it merits a manifesto in response. Calvinists have always debated double versus single predestination and limited versus general atonement—these are intra-Reformed family discussions. The "Old Calvinists" have been talking about these doctrines for centuries! Has something new happened on this front? Are there Calvinists somewhere in the SBC who have managed to impose double predestination and/or limited atonement on the Convention? If there are, I have not heard of them. One thing is for certain: if those folks are out there, they do not pastor well-known Southern Baptist churches, serve as SBC missionaries, work in SBC seminaries or other agencies, or attend the SBC Annual Meeting as messengers. In

¹⁶Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, and Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008). Hansen's book was a follow-up project to an earlier article he published on the same topic. See idem, "Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism is Making a Comeback—and Shaking up the Church," *Christianity Today* 50.2 (September 2006), available online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/42.32.html?paging=off> (accessed October 23, 2013).

¹⁷See Byron Cecil Lambert, "The Rise of the Anti-Mission Baptists: Sources and Leaders, 1800–1840" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1957); James R. Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Anti-Mission Movement, 1800–1840*, Studies in American Popular History and Culture (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2004); James A. Patterson, *James Robinson Graves: Staking the Boundaries of Baptist Identity*, Studies in Baptist Life and Thought (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 74, 150–52.

other words, they have no influence.

There is no doubt that Traditionalists are worried about the New Calvinists. Unfortunately, the Traditionalist Statement neither explains who the New Calvinists are nor expounds on what they have done to “radically” upset SBC unity. As this is the case, the Traditionalists should consider offering a less ambiguous critique or moderating the strident, but ultimately confusing rhetoric they put forward as the reason the Traditionalist Statement was published in the first place. The Preamble to the Traditionalist Statement claims “New Calvinism presents us with a duty and an opportunity to more carefully express what is generally believed by Southern Baptists about salvation.” I wish Traditionalists would have also taken the opportunity to “carefully express” their specific concerns with the New Calvinists and tell us exactly who these people are. I would like to know which of my fellow Calvinists are sowing discord and undermining the unity of our Convention. I am not a Traditionalist, but Traditionalists can count on me as an ally in rebuking radical and divisive voices among Southern Baptists, whether Calvinist or non-Calvinist.

Conclusion

In June 2012, I wrote an essay on my personal website titled “My Hope for Unity in the SBC.” That essay was written in part as my initial response to the Traditionalist Statement, or at least the debate it was then inspiring among Southern Baptists. I argued that Southern Baptists should unite around four priorities for the purpose of cooperation: 1) biblical inerrancy; 2) an evangelical view of salvation; 3) a Baptist view of the church; 4) and a commitment to the Great Commission. I then wrote the following words, which seem like an appropriate way to end these friendly reflections on the Traditionalist Statement by a Calvinistic Southern Baptist.

I remain convinced that if we all agree to unite around these four priorities as they are framed in the Baptist Faith and Message, we can continue to live together and labor together as Southern Baptist Christians. We all need to be open to correction, maintaining a teachable spirit. We all need to forebear those who disagree with us over debatable matters. We need to focus the vast majority of our energies on the matters we share in common, not the issues upon which we disagree. And we need to demonstrate to the world that Southern Baptists care about more than simply fighting among ourselves and trying to win arguments.¹⁸

¹⁸Nathan A. Finn, “My Hope for Unity in the SBC,” *Christian Thought & Tradition* (June 15, 2012), available online at <http://www.nathanfinn.com/2012/06/15/my-hope-for-unity-in-the-sbc/> (accessed October 21, 2013).

Why I Did Not Affirm the “Traditional” Statement: A Non-Calvinistic Perspective



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Let me be clear: I am a lifelong Southern Baptist who does not self-identify as a Calvinist. While I know and love many Southern Baptists who properly call themselves “Calvinistic” in their understandings of the so-called “doctrines of grace”—many of my closest friends gladly wear that description—I am not personally content with that label or some things associated with it.¹ Nevertheless, I chose not to affirm “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation,” a document intended to represent “the beliefs of the majority of Southern Baptists, who are not Calvinists.” In this brief article, I want to explain why.

Allow me to begin by stating that I share several concerns about the future of our convention with those who affirm this statement—several concerns also shared by Calvinistic Southern Baptists. As Southern Baptists committed to the Great Commission, several things should trouble us: the long-term projected decline in SBC membership, ever-shrinking Cooperative Program receipts, and most troubling, the lowest number of baptisms reported in sixty-two years. This trajectory means that SBC churches are growing increasingly irrelevant and/or ineffective in their respective ministry contexts. I also share concerns about some of the strategic moves made by those in leadership positions across the convention, particularly in mission strategies that downplay personal evangelism, social ministry, and theological education. While I recognize that head counting in churches can lead to sinful pride or idolatrous fixation, I am also concerned about a group of pastors and leaders in the SBC who altogether neglect the narrative discerned from the numbers: that churches and baptisms are shrinking because of methodical failure on the part of their leadership to multiply disciples. As a theologian-in-training and a pastor, I am also discouraged by certain ecclesiological trends that seem to undermine the heart of Baptist identity: a growing number of churches moving away from congregational polity, and perhaps

¹While I recognize that many Baptists are “Calvinistic” in their understandings of biblical soteriology, I also try to shy away from using the label “Calvinist” to describe any Baptist who affirms credobaptism or congregational polity. The designation “Calvinist” is a loaded term that, many of those in Presbyterian or Reformed traditions will make note, entails more than an affirmation of the five points of Calvinism. To be a Calvinist in the fullest sense also involves holding to a Reformed ecclesiology, which most Southern Baptists do not do. As the Calvinism Advisory Committee of the SBC recently noted, “Southern Baptist identity has often been connected to Calvinism, yet has often significantly modified it” (The Calvinism Advisory Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, “Truth, Trust, and Testimony in a Time of Tension,” June 2013; available at <http://www.sbclife.org/Articles/2013/06/sla5.asp> (accessed December 11, 2013)).

even more disturbing, a growing number of SBC churches that no longer require obedience in believer's baptism for full church membership.

But I don't think the blame rests solely on the Calvinistic contingency of the convention. A new generation of Southern Baptists has grown up without pastoral leaders in the vein of Adrian Rogers or Jerry Vines—men who modeled masterful exposition in the pulpits of local churches and Baptist statesmanship. In the years following the transition of the first Conservative Resurgence leadership, many young Southern Baptists have looked at pastor-expositors outside of SBC life for leadership and direction—many of whom are more Calvinistic in their understandings of soteriology. I am not discounting the way God can use these individuals—as if God only works in our convention!—but I am expressing discontent with the fact that the many of the pastoral and preaching models young individuals like myself had did not always reflect our unique theological and missiological identity as Southern Baptists.

Despite my disagreement with key points in this “Traditional” statement on Southern Baptist soteriology, there are parts that I gladly affirm and commend its framers for stating so boldly. First, I want to praise its authors for stressing God's universal saving intent and its explicit affirmation that the Gospel is truly good news for every person who ever lives. The statement rightly affirms that any person can be saved and rightly denies that “only a select few are capable of responding to the Gospel while the rest are predestined to eternity in hell” (Article 1). Second, I commend its authors for an affirmation of penal substitutionary atonement made available for all who freely respond in repentance and faith (Article 3). (More could be said to define penal substitutionary atonement—as I suspect this could be a hot-button issue again in the near future—but I understand that the focus of the article is on the extent of the atonement.) Third, most Southern Baptists—Calvinistic and less Calvinistic alike—can gladly affirm the eternal security of the believer as it is described in Article 9. Most importantly, evangelicals of every stripe can essentially agree with Article 10, which stresses the urgency and priority of the Great Commission, as well as soteriological exclusivity of the Christian gospel.

Nonetheless, the statement has several problem areas that keep me from affirming it or embracing it. I will turn my attention to these now.

1. I won't affirm the “Traditional” statement because of its majoritarian language and approach to the subject matter.

Eric Hankins and others associated with the statement expressed dissatisfaction with the designation “non-Calvinist” to describe their position. I share in this discontent. Like all negative labels, the term “non-Calvinist” can mean so many things that it has no meaning at all. Strictly speaking, one may properly label an ardent atheist, a Baptist preacher, or a used car salesman “non-Calvinistic” without really giving any kind of positive or distinctive identifying feature! To use the term “non-Calvinist” as a theological category is about as useful as saying “non-Buddhist” or “non-Mormon.” While a term like this may accurately reflect a negation of a particular

paradigm, these negative designations still operate with borrowed capital from the paradigm that is being rejected. Some other attempts to describe the non-Calvinistic Baptist position are equally unhelpful, especially when those on the other side of the aisle invoke pejoratives like “Pelagian” or “Semi-Pelagian.”

Hankins proposes an alternative description: “We propose that what most Southern Baptists believe about salvation can rightly be called ‘Traditional’ Southern Baptist soteriology, which should be understood in distinction to ‘Calvinist’ soteriology.” Unfortunately, the designation “Traditional” is no more helpful. As any historian of SBC life would acknowledge, Southern Baptists are a people of many traditions. Whose tradition constitutes “Traditional”? While we share a common metanarrative in the gospel, common ecclesiological distinctives, and shared sense of mission and purpose, we historically have disagreed about many secondary and tertiary theological and methodological issues. As I frequently jest, “Where two are three Baptists are gathered, four or five dissenting opinions are present among them.” As others in this debate have pointed out, there are many different “traditional” statements in SBC life (many of which significantly predate this current statement) that evidence considerably different points of view on Calvinism and/or Arminianism. Furthermore, the description “Traditional” or “Traditionalist,” like the descriptor “non-Calvinist,” says nothing about the positions actually affirmed.

With his introduction, Hankins implies another name for the position advocated in the “Traditional” statement: “Southern Baptist.” There is an implicit dichotomy between the “Southern Baptist” position on soteriology and the “Calvinistic understanding of salvation,” apparent in the statement’s first line: “The following is a suggested statement of what Southern Baptists believe about the doctrine of salvation.” One could infer from this language is that Southern Baptists universally agree with this statement or that those who disagree with the statement are not Southern Baptists, but Hankins states that this is not his intention: “There is no thought that this document reflects what all Southern Baptists believe or that it should be imposed upon all Southern Baptists.” Nevertheless, the preamble could be clarified or sharpened as not to imply exclusions of those who disagree, simply by adding the descriptor “many”: “The following is a suggested statement of what *many* Southern Baptists believe about the doctrine of salvation.”

Overall, it seems wrongheaded to put the emphasis on what “most” or “the majority of Southern Baptists” believe about the doctrine of salvation, as this preamble frequently reiterates. I mean no offense when I say that my main concern is not whether my theological opinion reflects the majority of Southern Baptists, nor am I primarily concerned with whether my doctrine is identical to my Baptist forebears. To argue for a position’s correctness based its widespread acceptance is to commit an *ad populum* fallacy. Sometimes, as the old adage goes, “what is right is not always popular and what is popular is not always right.” As those who yield to the ultimate authority of Scripture, we should be more concerned with the Bible than the bandwagon. If the majority of Baptists believe what the Bible teaches about the doctrine of salvation, praise God! But the force of our argumentation should not rest on theological or ecclesiological majoritarianism.

2. I won't affirm the "Traditional" statement because of its description of theological anthropology contains numerous problems.

The affirmation of the second article begins with language that strongly resembles that of the BFM 1963 and 2000: "We affirm that, because of the fall of Adam, every person inherits a nature and environment inclined toward sin and that every person who is capable of moral action will sin."² So far, so good. With the language of a "nature . . . inclined toward sin" and statement about the inevitability of transgression on the part of every moral agent, no one can rightly describe the framers of the statement as "Pelagian," or, for that matter, "semi-Pelagian." Those who affirm the statement clearly affirm an inherited sinful nature and a proclivity to sin.

The next sentence of the affirmation is less clear: "Each person's sin alone brings the wrath of a holy God, broken fellowship with Him, ever-worsening selfishness and destructiveness, death, and condemnation to an eternity in hell." First, this statement is syntactically unclear, because it can mean either that (1) the moral, physical, social, and spiritual consequences of sin that an individual experiences are a direct result of his or her individual actions or that (2) the universal consequences of sin that every person experiences are the cumulative result of each person's individual choice to sin. Meaning (2) puts all in the state of universal condemnation, and meaning (1) places all the individual moral, social, physical, and spiritual consequences of sin entirely on the shoulders of the individual sinner. Given the denial of Article 2—that no person is "guilty before he [or she] has personally sinned"—it seems that meaning (1) is the intended meaning.

The framers of the statement stress that no person is any way under guilt or condemnation for any other individual's sinful actions, including those committed by Adam. This language seems motivated by a desire to deny infant condemnation and affirm an age of accountability doctrine. Fine and dandy. But the present wording of the affirmation—that "each person's sin alone brings . . . death"—raises an additional question: Does a person who dies in or before infancy lose their life as a result of his or her individual sinful choices? I doubt anyone who authored or signed the statement would answer that question affirmatively, but the statement seems to confuse multiple issues in the blanket statement that "each person's sin alone" results in these consequences. At least some consequences of sin seem to be the direct result of the sin of others, not "each person's sin alone." The way that this affirmation is presently written lacks much-needed clarity and precision.

The denial of Article 2 may be the most controversial and most contested part of the whole statement, which I find ironic because out of all the issues addressed in the statement—the

²Article 3 of the BFM (1963, 2000) states, "Through the temptation of Satan man transgressed the command of God, and fell from his original innocence whereby his posterity inherit a nature and an environment inclined toward sin."

affirmations of God's universal saving intention, the universal scope of the atonement, and the urgent mandate of the Great Commission—the denial of the Adamic imputation of guilt seems *completely irrelevant* to the authors' concern that some forms of Calvinistic teaching are negatively "impacting contemporary mission and ministry." In fact, it is hypothetically possible to have a five-point Calvinist that denies imputed guilt and a thoroughgoing Arminian or non-Calvinist who affirms imputed guilt. Neither of the systems, as defined by the five points of Calvinism or five counterpoints of Arminianism, directly address the matter. Furthermore, I have difficulty conceiving of a world where two Christians who agree that we inherit a sinful nature from Adam but disagree about whether we legally receive his guilt have any significant points of difference regarding mission or ministry. Both will affirm that the human race is in a terrible predicament because of Adam's sin and both will affirm that only Jesus can reverse the effects of the Fall. The issue of whether Adam is the direct cause of our legal guilt or only a secondary condition seems largely inconsequential if the primary issue addressed in the statement is whether the gospel should and can be offered to every person.

I feel that the document would be stronger, and more widely accepted by those like myself who do not embrace the Calvinistic label for themselves, if the second article were left out entirely, or at least limited to the language of the BFM. While I do not go so far as to label the denial of imputed Adamic guilt advocated by the framers of this statement "Pelagian" or "Semi-Pelagian," I find it to be an exegetically untenable and logically inconsistent position. One can affirm the BFM 1963 or 2000's language and hold to either position, but I personally desire to affirm both the doctrines of original, imputed Adamic guilt and the age of accountability. I believe that I once had a share in Adam's guilt parallel to the share in Christ's righteousness I presently possess. Both my share in Adam's guilt and my share in Christ's righteousness are consequents of voluntary participation, either in actual transgression or in personal faith in Christ.³

3. I won't affirm the "Traditional" statement because I believe it misrepresents my Calvinistic brothers and sisters on several key points.

³In a previously published article, I charged the framers of the "Traditional" statement with a position that ignores or muddles the Adam-Christ parallel of Rom 5:12-21. Following Millard Erickson's lead, I wrote that the most logically consistent and exegetically appropriate reading of the Adam-Christ parallel in Rom 5:12-21 is "to say that just as one must place conscious or voluntary faith in Christ in order to share in the salvation his righteous act produces, so too must one consciously sin in order to share in Adam's guilt. We may be born with Adam's guilt hanging over our heads, but we are not actually condemned for Adam's guilt until we reach an age of accountability wherein we can make genuine moral decisions. When we do become conscious moral agents and sin, we share in Adam's original condemnation...At this age of moral responsibility when conscious choices between right and wrong begin to be made, we must place voluntary faith in Christ or otherwise face eternal separation from God in hell" ("Original Sin and the Age of Accountability," *Louisiana Baptist Message*, 23 September 2013). See also Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 579-83.

What is most puzzling to me is the insistence that there are those among the so-called “New Calvinists” who are described as “committed to advancing in the churches an exclusively Calvinistic understanding of salvation . . . and to the goal of making Calvinism the central Southern Baptist position on God’s plan of salvation.” I don’t see the vast conspiracy charged of “New Calvinists” here, nor do I really understand what Hankins and the statement’s signatories mean by “New Calvinism” in the first place.⁴ I don’t deny that there may be numbskull Calvinistic pastors out there—“numbskull” being a technical theological term—who push their theological positions on unwilling recipients, or those who would reject the practice of altar calls in church that has historically practiced them. But I don’t blame that mentality or practice on the doctrines of Calvinism any more than I would blame the doctrines of dispensationalism on a pastor who tried to force his association into his interpretation of Daniel 9. While I know of particular exceptions where young, inexperienced Calvinistic Baptists have made brash and unwise decisions in local churches, I also know of instances where young, inexperienced non-Calvinistic Baptists have also made brash and unwise decisions in local churches—myself included. In short, I do not think the description that the “Traditional” statement offers of “New Calvinism” truly reflects the movement as a whole, and I believe that sinful people—not doctrinal systems—are to blame for division and disruption in ministry.

Many of my complaints about the statement have to do with its authors’ choice of language at key points. In several places, I found that a word here or a word there would do much to strengthen its affirmations and denials. In several places where I believe the authors were intending to critique Calvinistic positions, I believe they were misrepresenting them, or at least, as Jonathan Akin and others have rightly observed, creating Calvinistic straw men. For example, as Akin points out, the statement, particularly in Article 6, seems to imply that all New Calvinists affirm the doctrine of double predestination—a doctrine that seems to be a minority position among Calvinistic Baptists.⁵

Moreover, in Article 5, the framers of the statement deny “that any person is regenerated prior to or apart from hearing and responding to the Gospel.” Here there seems to be a considerable misunderstanding of what many Calvinists and Calvinistic Baptists believe about regeneration. First and foremost, I have yet to hear a Calvinist argue that one is regenerated apart from faith and a response to the proclamation of God’s Word, save for the exception sometimes made by those who affirm that children or the mentally handicapped who die before making a conscious

⁴Perhaps the framers of the statement have the group of young Reformed Christians identified by Collin Hansen as the “New Calvinists.” See Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008). Hansen’s description of the “New Calvinists” hardly matches Hankins’s far-less-favorable description.

⁵See Jonathan Akin, “A Response to ‘A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation,’” *BaptistTwentyOne*, entry posted May 31, 2012, <http://www.baptisttwentyone.com/2012/05/a-response-to-a-statement-of-the-traditional-southern-baptist-understanding-of-gods-plan-of-salvation/> (accessed November 12, 2013).

faith decision are somehow, by God's grace, regenerated in death. (Which raises the question for me whether the signatories of the "Traditional" statement believe that those who die apart from conscious faith in Christ are ever regenerated from the sinful nature they inherit from Adam, but that is another issue entirely.⁶) Second, while I do from time to time (no pun intended) read Calvinists and Calvinistic Baptists who understand regeneration prior to faith as a chronological category, it seems that most mean *that regeneration is logically prior to faith, not chronologically prior*. That is to say that for most who hold this doctrine, regeneration causes faith but it is *chronologically simultaneous* with faith.⁷ Those who affirm logically prior regeneration simply mean that one cannot experience saving faith apart from the special, efficacious calling of the Spirit.

Furthermore, most Calvinistic Baptists I know would seem to have no difficulty whatsoever affirming the language of Article 7, which affirms God's "eternal knowledge of and sovereignty over every person's salvation or condemnation" and denies "that God's sovereignty and knowledge require Him to cause a person's acceptance or rejection of faith in Christ." The affirmation is consistent with the belief with Reformed conceptions of God's sovereignty in salvation, and the denial—at least the way that it is presently worded—seems to be a simple affirmation of *God's freedom*. No Calvinistic Christian I know would say that the sovereignty and knowledge of God "require Him" to do anything, let alone "require Him to cause a person's acceptance . . . of faith in Christ." Calvinistic Christians generally, if not universally, affirm God's freedom to do what he pleases, not a requirement or compulsion for God to act in any certain way.⁸ If by this denial the framers intend to mean that "God's sovereignty never entails his choice to cause some to accept or reject Christ," then clearly there is disagreement between the Calvinistic Baptist and the non-Calvinistic Baptist, but this is not the present wording of the statement.

⁶Another related question has to do with the language of the denial of Article 10. There, the framers "deny that salvation is possible outside of a *faith response* to the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (emphasis mine). This language is consistent with the latest revision of the Baptist Faith and Message, which states, "There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord" (BFM 2000, Article 4). I agree with the framers of both these statements that we should wholeheartedly affirm soteriological exclusivism or particularism and deny inclusivism or universalism, but I wonder what this particular statement says about those who are mentally incapable of responding to the gospel (i.e., infants and the mentally handicapped). Are they beyond the need for salvation—even the saving effects of Christ that would remove the sinful nature they inherit from Adam—or is it impossible for them to be saved? The answer is unclear. Perhaps the "Traditional" statement could be revised to state "For those under condemnation, there is no salvation apart from personal faith" or a "faith response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

⁷The distinction between chronological and logical priority is difficult for many to grasp, but it can easily be illustrated when we think about *simultaneous causes and effects*. For instance, a husband must die in order for his wife to become a widow, but a woman does not become a widow *after* her husband dies but *when* her husband dies. For a woman to become a widow, a husband's death is *logically* but not *chronologically* prior.

⁸Some theological voluntarists would state that God is free to do absolutely anything (including sin), but others would argue that God is free even when he acts in accordance with his essential character and nature. Neither would use the language that God is *required* to act in any certain way.

4. I won't affirm the "Traditional" statement because the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 seems to be a completely sufficient statement about what Southern Baptists believe about the doctrine of salvation.

In my classes, I frequently stress the important role of doctrinal taxonomization in theological method—the need to distinguish between *essential* and *non-essential* doctrines.⁹ As I understand doctrinal taxonomy, there are at least four levels of doctrinal significance. The first level constitutes absolutely essential Christian belief. If one denies doctrinal beliefs at this first level—doctrines such as the true divinity and humanity of Christ, the Trinity, the authority of Scripture, and salvation by grace through faith—one denies the gospel and is under the curse (Gal. 1:8-9). The second level constitutes evangelical identity, or what binds conservative Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and others together as evangelicals. Commitment to evangelism and biblical inerrancy are common descriptions of this second level. The third level of doctrine establishes denominations and local churches. For Baptists, distinctives like credobaptism, congregational polity, and regenerate church membership constitute this third tier. We rightly recognize that other believers may disagree with us about these issues and still be faithful Christians, but we draw the line of local church or denominational fellowship on these issues. The fourth tier consists of doctrines about which we can agree to disagree, tertiary or non-essential doctrines that do not prevent us from fellowshiping together in a local church or partnering together in a common mission. Doctrines like one's interpretation of the millennium typically fall into this fourth category. To put a doctrine in the fourth tier is not to deny its importance or to deny that a misunderstanding at this level can have implications for more significant doctrines; it is simply an affirmation of the difficulty that Christians have interpreting certain biblical texts—texts like Romans 9 or Revelation 20.

As R. Albert Mohler astutely observes, the temptation of theological liberalism is to deny the need for any first-tier or essential doctrines, and the temptation of some forms of theological fundamentalism is to demand that all doctrines be treated as essential. I don't think the "Traditional" statement makes either of these mirroring errors, but it does seem to give certain doctrines others would describe as tertiary or fourth-tier issues a greater level of importance than

⁹I draw inspiration from R. Albert Mohler's "doctrinal triage" and Roger E. Olson and Stanley Grenz's three-tiered doctrinal taxonomy. See R. Albert Mohler, Jr. "A Call for Theological Triage and Christian Maturity," AlbertMohler.com, entry posted July 12, 2005, <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/07/12/a-call-for-theological-triage-and-christian-maturity/> (accessed February 5, 2012). See also Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 70-77.

they deserve. The beauty of a document like the *Baptist Faith and Message* is that it affirms first-tier doctrines that one must believe in order to be a Christian, second-tier doctrines that define evangelicals, and third-tier doctrines that describe our unique Baptist identity but leaves room for disagreement on fourth-tier theological issues.

The BFM allows Baptists to disagree on issues that have little or no consequence for fellowship and common mission, even on issues like election. In all three of its iterations, the BFM (1925, Article 9; 1963, 2000, Article 5) offers an eloquent description of the doctrine of election as:

the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end. It is the glorious display of God's sovereign goodness, and is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable. It excludes boasting and promotes humility.

The language gives a very basic definition of election, its relationship to other soteriological and anthropological doctrines, and even provides a statement about the doctrine's practical significance. Yet the definition says nothing whatsoever about whether this election is individual or corporate or conditional or unconditional. It is written in such a way that Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic Baptists alike can agree on its formulation. It only requires believers to affirm what biblical language explicitly says about the doctrine and leaves room for disagreement about the interpretation of its specific elements.

The "Traditional" statement, by contrast, seems to move fourth-tier or tertiary issues into positions of greater theological prominence, meaning that it could pose the threat of creating unnecessary division among Southern Baptists. I, for one, am thankful for my Calvinistic brothers and sisters who share with me a concern to share the gospel with every man, woman, and child, who are committed to upholding biblical inerrancy and doctrinal truth, and who desire above everything else to bring glory and honor to God. We may disagree about how God elects and the way the atonement is applied, but we can agree on first-, second-, and third-tier doctrinal issues.

Conclusion

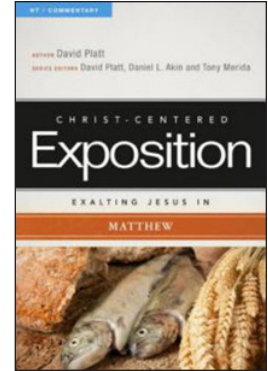
In this article, I have tried to explain why I—a non-Calvinistic Southern Baptist theologian-in-training—have reservations about affirming "A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God's Plan of Salvation." I have charged the framers of the statement with a problematic approach that emphasizes majoritarianism and which frequently misrepresents our more Calvinistic brothers and sisters. The statement frequently lacks the clarity and precision I would desire of a statement that represents my own soteriological beliefs which are not Calvinistic, and the second article of the statement—the article that seems to raise the most concerns for me—seems completely irrelevant to the stated purpose of its authorship.

I am particularly thankful for Eric Hankins and others who are committed to personal

evangelism and preserving Southern Baptist identity. While I disagree with this statement on several crucial points, I truly appreciate the major concern behind it. Yet my primary concern now is to build bridges with young Calvinistic Baptists in our convention, not alienate them or exclude them from co-ownership in the Baptist Experiment. The more recent statement put forward by the Calvinism Advisory Committee (of which Hankins and other signatories of the “Traditional” statement were a part), “Truth, Trust, and Testimony in a Time of Tension,” is a far more nuanced and balanced statement that emphasizes points of agreement between Southern Baptists while clearly distinguishing points of disagreement. Time will tell whether this newer statement can address the concerns of many on both sides of the aisles, but it is a positive step forward, and one demanding the attention of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry.

Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Matthew. By David Platt. Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2013. 392 pages. Paperback, \$12.99.

David Platt is the pastor of the Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, AL. Formerly, he taught preaching and served as Dean of Chapel at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, from which he earned his Ph.D. Platt is a popular speaker and preacher and is the author of the best-selling *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*. He is also an editor of the *Christ-Centered Exposition* series, along with Daniel L. Akin and Tony Merida. *Exalting Jesus in Matthew* is second in that series.



Currently, one of the hottest topics within the evangelical community is the nature of Christocentric hermeneutics and homiletics. Books, articles, and public discussions abound, but consensus seems to be elusive. Some insist that every single passage of Scripture points to Jesus, while others argue that in a broader and more general sense Jesus is the ultimate focus of the entirety of the biblical metanarrative. The debate is far from settled, for as I heard Ed Stetzer say recently, “One man’s exegesis is another man’s allegory.”

This is why the timing of the *Christ-Centered Exposition* series is apropos. The editors are endeavoring to offer a homiletical commentary grounded in a conviction that the focus of the Bible is Messianic, explaining that they “purpose to exalt Jesus from every book of the Bible” without resorting to “wild allegory or fanciful typology.” Citing Luke 24:25-27, 44-47, and John 5:39, 46 as foundational to their heremeneutic, they presuppose that careful exegesis will lead to Christ-centered exposition.¹

If you are looking for a critical commentary, this and the other volumes in the series will not fit the bill. Admittedly non-academic, the book is presented as a collection of sermons with each chapter constituting a different sermon. As expected, Platt handles the text with a seriousness that demonstrates a high view of Scripture. Though not critical in nature, the work contains more than a surface-level treatment of the biblical material. For example, in the chapter dealing with Matt 3:1-17, the author’s definition of the word “repent” is grounded in the meaning of the Greek term (51). Moreover, he consistently provides relevant information on the social setting of various passages.

Fundamentally, Platt devotes much time setting context and explaining the text. He is to be commended for this, but explanation is the functional homiletical element that dominates the sermons. He does provide application, but he mostly does so with broad strokes, such as in his chapter on the Great Commission. There, he encourages all believers to make disciples, rightly saying, “We show one another how to pray, how to study God’s Word, how to grow in Christ,

¹This information is taken from the “Series Introduction” by the editors. The first two installments cover New Testament books, but the volumes dealing with the Old Testament should reveal more details about their Christocentric methodology.

and how to lead others to Christ” (376). However, he falls short of telling the average person in the pew exactly how to go about such ministry. How does a person who does not know how to pray or study begin to learn for himself so that he can reproduce growing discipleship in others?

Illustration is the functional element in shortest supply. Not only will you find few analogical stories in *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, but you will not even see much in the way of demonstrative illustration. For example, when discussing the dangers of legalism, he says, “The more we convince ourselves that we can reform our lives, the more we find ourselves working harder and harder; yet we come up empty every time” (168). This would be a great time to talk about some specific ways that his listeners might tend to rely on human effort for justification. His listeners would be well served to see what this looks like in a contemporary setting.

Perhaps Platt is depending on the readers to provide more concrete application and real-life illustrative material. Each chapter ends with a section titled “Reflect and Discuss.” This section contains questions to be used in a small group setting, since one recent trend is for churches to base their small group discussions on the sermons immediately preceding their group times. If this is your model, you will find this series extremely helpful. Otherwise, you might use these questions to help generate ideas for your own applications and illustrations.

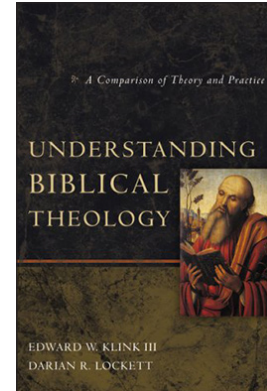
Overall, I highly recommend *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*. You might find that it leans too heavily on explanation, and some of the chapters might take bites of Scripture too long for your sermons.² Nevertheless, the Christocentric focus of the work avoids the moralistic therapeutic deism that is so prevalent in contemporary evangelicalism. If you are looking for a homiletical commentary that sees Jesus as the hero of every text, then you will not be disappointed.

— Mike Miller, New Orleans, Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, LA, and First Baptist Church, Kenner, LA

²For example, Platt covers the entire Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) in one chapter. Numerous other chapters in the book are also devoted to entire chapters of Scripture. In some cases (such as with the Sermon on the Mount), this involves a broad overview, but in other cases, this might just lead to a long sermon.

Understanding Biblical Theology. By Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. 193 pages. Paperback, \$17.99.

The field of biblical theology is surprisingly diverse. At first blush, one would expect general agreement that biblical theology is Christian theology which is derived from the Bible. But a wide variety of definitions and methods dot the landscape. Klink and Lockett's recent volume *Understanding Biblical Theology* brings order to the chaos.



Edward Klink and Darian Lockett both serve as associate professors of New Testament at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University. After briefly tracing the history of the field since Gabler's 1787 address, they identify five issues that they seek to address. Reframed as questions, the issues are:

1. What is the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament?
2. How should we understand the historical diversity and theological unity of the Bible?
3. What is the field's scope (original or contemporary readers) and sources (use of extra-biblical material)?
4. What is the subject matter of biblical theology (or, to whom does it speak)?
5. Is biblical theology a task for the church or the academy?

Next, the authors provide as a heuristic tool a plotline which identifies and places five types of biblical theology according to their relationship to the two poles on the line of history and theology. Each type is designated BT1 to BT5. Those types are at either side of the plotline, with BT1 on the far left (history) and BT5 on the far right (theology). The other types fall between them in numerical order.

The core of the book explains each of the five types of biblical theology by answering the five questions above from the respective position, and offering a summary and assessment of a representative's work for each type of biblical theology.

Biblical Theology as Historical Description (BT1) aims to describe the content of the Bible, not prescribe a theological synthesis, or application, for the present. The "method is entirely controlled by a historical-critical methodology that is descriptive in nature" (30). BT1 is typified in the work of James Barr. Because the OT and NT are not considered properly related to one another, a whole-Bible theology is considered a misguided project. Also, the historical background of the biblical text, due to the focus on history, overpowers the content and application of the text. The authors establish Barr's view of biblical theology as "a historical task of describing what ancient peoples believed" (51), which makes it a task by and for the academy, not the church.

BT2, or Biblical Theology as History of Redemption seeks "to discern the coherence

of the whole Bible as it unfolds over time” (60). The unity between the testaments can be discerned by identifying themes such as covenant or kingdom (61). The Dallas, Chicago, and Philadelphia Schools represent slightly different methodologies and are named after advocates from the seminaries of Dallas Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary, respectively (67–73). For the Dallas and Chicago schools, biblical theology is the bridge between exegesis and systematic theology; for the Philadelphia school, “biblical theology regulates the exegetical task” (72). DA Carson is the representative of this view, and he regards biblical theology as a “bridge discipline between responsible exegesis and responsible systematic theology” (78). Klink and Lockett rightly observe that Carson may underestimate the abstracting influence of history, reason, and philosophy on one’s biblical theology (89).

Biblical Theology as Worldview-Story (BT3) uses narrative “to broker a balance between history and theology” (95). Rather than tracing the progression of a theme throughout the testaments (as in BT2), this view assumes a narrative unity between the testaments and is open to insights drawn from extra-biblical sources in order to reconstruct the context of the historical narrative. NT Wright represents this view. As Klink and Lockett observe, Wright does not simply cobble together extra-biblical parallels to biblical texts. Rather, he draws upon the extra-biblical material in order to reconstruct the “worldview-story,” which reshapes one’s reading of the biblical narrative (114). Although Wright seeks to balance history and theology by rooting the latter in the former, biblical scholarship has not yet rendered its final judgment regarding whether Wright has succeeded.

The Canonical Approach (BT4) to biblical theology seeks to affirm “both the descriptive (historical) and prescriptive (theological) nature of Scripture and its confessional community.” It is important to understand, though, what is meant by their use of the term canon. As the authors explain, “The meaning of Scripture is not located behind the text but in the canonical form of the text itself” (128). Brevard Childs is the representative of BT4. Canonical criticism prioritizes speculative, reconstructed forms of the text over the authorial intent of the text in its present form (137). While affirming Childs’ work in the field, the authors explore questions surrounding his varied usage of the term canon as well as the difficulty of constructing a theology from a textual form which exists only in the imagination of historical-critical scholars.

BT5 is biblical theology as Theological Construction. This view relates to a growing area of interest known as theological interpretation of Scripture. The focus of BT5 is the Bible’s relevance *for today* and is *prescriptive* in nature (158). Klink and Lockett explain, “The Bible is controlling of and controlled by its ecclesial community, its canon, and its interpretive tradition” (159). As BT1 views the academy as the custodians of biblical theology, BT5 regards it to be the job of the church. Francis Watson represents BT5. Watson’s theological hermeneutic consists of the *text* of Christian Scripture as read by the *church*, with a message which extends to the *world*. The authors cite the critiques by Stephen Fowl and Christopher Seitz, who ask (respectively) whether Watson’s theological interpretation has sufficiently loosed itself from the university

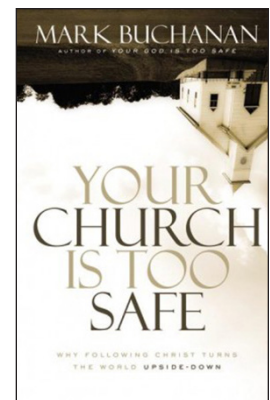
model of systematic theology and whether his Christological hermeneutic properly accounts for Trinitarian doctrinal development between the testaments (180–1).

The greatest strength of this book is its survey of the types. Because all of the representative theologians work in the area of biblical theology, it is the slight nuances and subtle distinctions among them which distinguish their views. If a weakness had to be identified, then it might be in the presentation of its findings. The five problems addressed by each of the five types of biblical theology were arranged in a particular order in the introduction and chart in the conclusion. But the problems were addressed in a different order in each chapter describing the type of biblical theology and in a different sequence again in the chapter presenting and assessing the prototype for each viewpoint. For example, the questions listed above were presented in the same sequence (1–5) in the introduction and concluding chart. But the chapter on BT1 addressed the problems in this order: 2, 5, 3, 1, 4. The chapter on Barr addressed the problems in yet another sequence: 2, 1, 3, 5, 2. Unfortunately, this inconsistent sequencing continued throughout the book. Even with this organizational challenge, the work is well-written, thoroughly researched, and would serve as an excellent primary or supplemental textbook in an undergraduate or graduate course in biblical theology.

– Adam Harwood, *New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, LA*

Your Church Is Too Safe. By Mark Buchanan. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. 230 pages. Hardcover, \$18.99.

Your Church Is Too Safe is the sequel to, and in some aspects the culmination of, *Your God Is Too Safe*. The latter was a challenge to the pilgrimaging individual believer, while the former targets the gathered body of believers, or more accurately the institution recognized as the church. The focal subjects of each book were distinct but not disparate. Both books were meant as a challenge to the widespread practice of inadequately approaching God as a “tame lion” (to borrow from C.S. Lewis) because God does not present Himself as the safe choice and has not called people to live safe lives.



Your Church Is Too Safe is Buchanan’s seventh and most recent book, written while serving as a Baptist pastor and professor. His writing is extremely readable and engaging as he deftly weaves biblical exposition, practical application, and masterful illustration in a thoughtful and thought-provoking manner. Buchanan’s literary style and approach embody the pensive professor and the practical pastor. His illustrative abilities truly are remarkable as his works provide a treasure trove of witty, poignant, and powerful illustrations.

As the title indicates, Buchanan’s book levies strong accusations against the church, specifically

the western church. Typically, books in this vein are received in one of two general ways: appreciation or frustration. Often, disillusioned dechurched individuals applaud stern rebukes of the institution known as the local church. Similarly but with different views and motives, pastors immersed in the quagmire of a struggling, broken church at times can react with appreciation due to approximation.

Contrastingly, others often become frustrated at the voluminous material castigating the bride of Christ, the under shepherds, or the sheep for whom Christ died. While this reviewer tries to read with charity and stay open-minded (with obvious and absolute boundaries), he often finds himself in the latter category of frustration at the myriad resources indicting the family of God. That being said, Buchanan's work comes across as neither an embittered nor embattled saint launching fire balls at the Church. Rather, he comes projects the image of a pastor-prophet, lovingly and pointedly encouraging and challenging the Church to be more like Jesus and the New Testament Church. He presents his case as one who loves Christ and the Church but also as one who recognizes the Church is not meeting the standards of the call of God nor reacting appropriately to the amazing Gospel opportunities offered by the current cultural milieu.

Buchanan wrote his manifesto for the Church to become a more adequate representation of the Kingdom by embodying Christ and impacting the world (14). He attempts to provide a solution to the perceived identity problem of the Church as he longingly asks: "When did we start making it our priority to be safe instead of dangerous, nice instead of holy, cautious instead of bold, self-absorbed instead of counting everything loss in order to be found in Christ" (9)? The book seeks to arouse the "apatheist," those who believe God exists but do not care or act like He exists, to engage in living for the Kingdom (130).

The structure of the book is rather loose as the nineteen chapters are not grouped into sections and do not advance in an obviously logical and systematic progression toward the work's denouement. Although some of the chapters build consecutively upon the previous, many of the chapters seem to stand alone as they address issues affecting the church. Taken as a whole, however, the chapters converge to portray vividly the contemporary church embracing the call and challenge of living in a way that would "turn the world upside down" as the early church was accused of doing in Acts 17:6.

Buchanan offers fresh insights and innovative ministry ideals for reaching outsiders, which can come with challenging and confusing issues. One significant contribution of the book is the call for believers to leave the safe confines of the church and to engage non-believers at neutral, or "in-between places," which are those settings inhabited by both believers and non-believers (105). Another notable discussion relevant to contemporary Christianity recognized the impetus and approach for the cohesion of grace and truth. Buchanan offered a profound statement his church found helpful in providing direction and discernment for dispensing grace and truth: "When we speak truth, it should be so grace-soaked it's hard to reject; when we show grace, it should be so truth-soaked it's hard to accept" (134).

While the book offers a beneficial perspective for churches within contemporary western Christianity, the work is not without its deficiencies. Most severe among the weaknesses is the sometimes excessive creativity used with the biblical text. In his quest to make a point or to offer ingenious illustrations or applications, Buchanan at times takes creative liberties with the historical backgrounds, social settings, or emphases of referenced biblical texts. Another weakness is that although Buchanan offers personal stories to illustrate ministry practices, he does not provide an adequate amount of practical steps for implementation. The book focuses more on the impetus and ideas behind the proposed lifestyle than on the practical “how-to” of the lifestyle.

For believers, the call to turn the world upside down is a noble and challenging call that must be heeded if the contemporary Church will make an impact on the world. In *Your Church Is Too Safe* Mark Buchanan offers an impassioned albeit imperfect plea for believers to do just that.

— Blake Newsom, *New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, LA*

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