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G5 ~ Houston, Texas
November 7, 2009

"Calvinism and Baptists—Friends or Foes?"

Thank you, Dr. Timothy George. It is a distinct honor for me to participate in this discussion with you, and I thank Dr. Denison for this marvelous opportunity.

For my prepared remarks, Dr. Denison has asked me to do two basic things: First, he has asked me to “demonstrate” the arguments typically opposed to classical soteriological Calvinism. Second, he has graciously invited me to set forth my own perspectives on the matter of Calvinism as I see it.

So I proceed to my first task, to “demonstrate,” and I take it, neither as a scientist or lawyer, but perhaps as an accountant would, the arguments often marshaled against the Calvinistic doctrines of sovereign grace. Seven complaints that adversaries often raise against Calvinism came to mind and they are these:

1. Calvinism lopsidedly emphasizes the sovereignty of God to the neglect of His other attributes, especially His love and goodness, thereby neglecting the time-honored centerpiece of the Protestant Reformation on justification by faith.¹

¹ If we understand God in His simplistic totality as a whole and not emphasize one aspect of His being at the expense of another, we should regard God as simultaneously and completely sovereign and just, and also loving and good. The Scriptures say so. Regarding sovereignty and justice, Psalm 103: 19 states: “The Lord has established His throne in the heavens//And His sovereignty (or kingdom) rules over all.” Deuteronomy 32: 4 adds: “The Rock! His work is perfect//For all His ways are just//A God of faithfulness and without injustice//Righteous and upright is He.” Similar teachings are found in Romans 2:11; 1 Timothy 1: 17; Revelation 1: 8. Regarding God’s goodness and love, Psalm 100: 5 affirms: “For the Lord is good//His lovingkindness is everlasting//And His faithfulness to all generations.” 1 John 4: 8, 16 state: “The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. ... God is love and the one who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him.” Similar teachings are found in Psalm 25: 8; Jeremiah 33: 11; John 3: 16; Romans 5: 8.

God is sovereign and just, loving and good, simplistically and totally so. Thus His sovereignty and justice are loving and good, and His love and goodness are sovereign and just. Hence, if we can hold these magnificent properties of God together in simple unison, we can avoid any latent errors, whether of Calvinistic or Arminian

2. It casts aspersions on the beneficence of God.
3. It links evil and evil acts to the will and character of God, and to the tragedies and miserable conditions of human beings — past, present, and future.
4. Calvinism thwarts or undermines motivation for missions, evangelism and ministries of justice and mercy.
5. It fails to square adequately with the content of specific biblical texts that proclaim a general “whosoever” gospel (1 John 2: 2; 2 Peter 2:1), and strains credulity when these texts are hermeneutically forced to fit the Calvinist system.
6. It fosters un-Christ-like dispositions of arrogance, elitism, and exclusionism rather than humility, grace, and gratitude, language to the contrary notwithstanding (present company excluded). Ironically, some who hold to the doctrines of grace do so ungraciously.
7. As a monolithic, virtually impregnable, theological system, its adherents may refuse to admit weaknesses, and fail to consider alternative interpretations of the biblical materials regarding salvific matters.

With these criticisms in mind, my recent review of notable Baptist statements of faith (The New Hampshire Confession, 1833; The Abstract of Principles, 1859; the Baptist Faith and Message, 1925, along with its several editions) leads me to *suggest, not assert*, that, with the exception of particular Baptists, most Baptist churches have, indeed, been historically Calvinistic, but of the more moderate, Amyraldian kind.

Amyraldism (or sometimes, Amyraldianism) was a theological system named after Moise Amyraut (1596-1664), a Reformed, French protestant theologian who held to the main tenets of Calvinism. Nevertheless, he “sought to

persuasion. God is loving and good in His administration of salvation; God is sovereign and just in the expression of His love. In these ways, God’s very existence, essence, and nature, which are one and the same, properly frame this discussion concerning Calvinism and Baptists. Who God is and what He is like, remain, as always, the most important questions of all.

revise what he judged to be unacceptable teachings of seventeenth century scholastic Calvinism on grace and predestination” (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s. v. “Amyraut, Moise”). Amyraut believed he was recovering Calvin’s actual teachings on the subject. He also sought to build bridges with the Lutherans (who had been offended by the Synod of Dordt) by making justification by faith, rather than predestination, the central issue of Protestantism.

In Amyraut’s theology, Christ’s atonement was sufficient for all and conditioned on belief. However, because of human depravity, belief required the grace of God, and, accordingly, salvation was efficient only for the elect. For Amyraut, this perspective constituted a kind of unlimited, limited atonement, coupled with the four remaining tenets of regular Calvinism. So this was/is four point or perhaps 4.5 point Calvinism!

In any case, Amyraut believed that divine predestination was an inscrutable mystery, hidden from the comprehension of finite human beings. He also taught that to engage in speculation about God’s secret purposes in election and reprobation was futile. As Paul says in Romans 11: 33, “How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways.” Thus, instead of trying to peer into these impenetrable matters, Christians must faithfully preach Christ as Lord and Savior of the world, calling for faith in His sufficient work to the glory of God, leaving the results to Him.

This seems to be the position articulated in various Baptist statements of faith, including this one (Baptist Faith and Message, 1925): “The blessings of salvation are made free to all by the Gospel. ... Election is the gracious purpose

of God, according to which he regenerates, sanctifies and saves sinners. ... [in a manner] perfectly consistent with the free agency of man. ... a most gracious display of God's sovereign goodness, ... [which] is infinitely wise, holy, and unchangeable.”

And now I move on to my second task of presenting a perspective of my own on this matter of Calvinism. *Time Magazine* earlier this year proclaimed the new Calvinism as the third of ten key ideas changing the world today.² As this article clearly conveys, Calvinism is a controversial theme, not only in the world, but also in the church. It is also, in itself, a contested term. What exactly does “Calvinism” mean? When many people hear this word, often they identify it in the manner in which we have been discussing it: as a system of predestined salvation, with all of its attendant connotations.

This understanding, however, hardly exhausts the meaning and significance of the concept. In fact, when I hear the word “Calvinism,” my mind leaps, almost automatically, to what has become known in the last one hundred years or so as contemporary neo-Calvinism, or Kuyperianism, named after the Dutch polymath Abraham Kuyper who lived from 1837-1920. While Abraham Kuyper was himself a classic Calvinist in the soteriological sense of the word, he was equally, if not more, interested in the cultural implications of the sovereignty of God and Lordship of Christ over the whole of life. As Kuyper thundered in the climax of his inaugural address as the founder and first president of the Free

² See http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html. Accessed December 8, 2009.

University of Amsterdam, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine!” For him, Calvinism was not just a sectarian name or a dogmatic theology, but rather it was an entire life system, or what we today know as a Christian and biblical world and life view.

Along with Scottish Presbyterian theologian and educator James Orr, Abraham Kuyper appropriated the German term *Weltanschauung* or worldview, scrubbed off its unacceptable philosophical barnacles, and pressed it into service of Christ and the kingdom of God. In Kuyper’s estimation, a Calvinism based on the sovereign, Trinitarian God as the omnipotent Creator and gracious Redeemer of all things constituted a radically comprehensive worldview. It was the only way, in his mind, of successfully meeting modernism as an equally comprehensive view of life in, the then, current contest for the hearts and minds of men and women, a conflict in which classical Christian apologetics had been most feeble, especially in its typical piecemeal approach. In Kuyper’s own words, “... it must be felt that in Modernism the vast energy of an all-embracing life-system assails us, then also it must be understood that we have to take our stand in a [Christian] life-system of equally comprehensive and far-reaching power” (*Lectures on Calvinism*, Eerdmans, p. 11).

Thus, in a biblically-revealed, humanly-knowable, God-centered Calvinism, not merely as a sect or soteriology, but as entire view of reality that conveys how human beings relate properly to God, to each other, and to the world, Kuyper’s own heart found rest and peace, vision and purpose. He worked

assiduously as a theologian, educator, journalist, politician, and, ultimately, as a [Calvinist] Christian, to honor the Lordship of Christ and restore His principles and glory to every sphere of human thought, life, and culture. For this reason, Kuyper in his famed *Lectures on Calvinism*, originally presented at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898, set forth the implications of Calvinism as a life-system on religion, politics, science, art, and the future. This is the hallmark characteristic of the neo-Calvinist, Kuyperian tradition as it has come to be known, and the concept of a biblical or Christian worldview became a tool by which to express this radically comprehensive vision of biblical faith.

Whereas Kuyper's approach was primarily theocentric in character, the aforementioned James Orr took a more Christological, Christ-centered approach, and focused upon the incarnation, person and work of Jesus Christ. For Orr, an entire worldview was bound up in an historic, orthodox Christology. Belief in Jesus entailed a host of additional convictions, forming an overall, comprehensive view of reality and human existence. As Orr put it, "He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of human destiny, found only in Christianity. This forms a 'Weltanschauung,' or 'Christian view of the world,' which stands in marked contrast with theories wrought out from a purely philosophical or scientific standpoint" (*The Christian View of God and the World*, Kregel, p. 4).

This *worldview* kind of Calvinism, so formulated by Kuyper and Orr, respectively centered in the sovereign God and focused on the Lord Jesus Christ, is the kind of Calvinism that excites me greatly, gets my blood boiling, and about which I care most deeply. Undoubtedly, the discussion about Calvinist soteriology is important, but for me the most important heritage of Calvinist Christianity is its gift to the Church of a biblical, Christian world and lifeview that honors the Lordship of Christ over all of life and all of life equally. This, I suggest, is the form or version of Calvinism that Baptist churches ought to be discussing vigorously today. It is, indeed, our friend!

The need for this Calvinistic contribution in the church and among believers is overwhelming. Having been teaching for some 30 years now, I have found that many Christian students, including many Baptist students, arrive in my classroom in serious or critical condition (whether they realize it or not). Their faith is fragmented into bits and pieces, lacking comprehensiveness and coherence; they are New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs Christians with little clue as to how the Old and New Testaments connect to form a unified biblical story; they are swamped in religious compartmentalization or dualism, having fallen victim to a vicious Gnosticism with its concomitant sacred/secular, eternal/temporal split; they are also held captive to a reigning postmodern pragmatism and to the dictatorship of popular culture, materialism, and consumerism. In response to these problems, I have held up before students and parishioners alike, the vision of a comprehensive Christian worldview. This worldview is centered on the Trinitarian God and comprised of unified biblical

narratives of creation, fall, redemption and consummation, with all their transformative theological, philosophical, spiritual, intellectual and socio-cultural meanings and implications.³

So I have three suggestions, strong suggestions. First, it is this robust, holistic worldview version of the Christian faith that Baptist Christians ought to incorporate into their intense pursuit of personal piety and holiness in order to grasp a more complete experience of God, their own humanity and what it means to be a Christian human being.⁴ Second, it is this robust, holistic worldview version of the Christian faith ought to be incorporated into Baptist churches' understanding and pursuit of missions and evangelism that they might not only save the lost (into the church and up to heaven), but, equally important,

³ As I have written about the transformative power of a biblical worldview in *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Eerdmans 2002), p. 342, "... the notion of 'worldview' has a mysterious way of opening up the parameters of the Bible so that believers might be delivered from a fishbowl-sized Christianity into an oceanic perspective on the faith. Somehow it removes the cognitive blinders and breaks the spiritual chains that have bound believers and thwarted the ministry of the Church and sets them free. ... Thus, when believers can understand the all-encompassing significance of the doctrine of creation, when they recognize radical consequences of sin across the whole spectrum of created existence, and when they understand the Lord Jesus Christ in his larger roles as the creator and redeemer of all things—then perhaps the doctrinal bits and pieces can be fit together into a totality, the narrative connections can be made between the Old and New Testaments, and the danger of dualism can be destroyed once for all. Worldview serves as a catalyst to an interpretation of biblical Christianity that focuses on the big picture—unified, coherent, and whole. Conceiving of the faith in this manner opens up fresh vistas and exciting possibilities rooted in the true nature of historic biblical faith. Christianity does indeed come into its own as a profound theological vision of the total cosmos with the help of the notion of worldview."

⁴ No wonder that many Christians, especially students that I have known, testify to the difference that an encounter with a biblical worldview has made in their lives. For Crystal it provided an understanding of authentic Christian freedom, supplying the liberty to be a human being fully alive. For Angie it constituted her most significant discovery at the university. For Kendra it was the development of a holistic perspective on life. For Matt it meant a deeper love for God and others in all things, provided a recognition of the value of all God-honoring vocations, and issued a challenge to be involved in society Christianly. For Rachel it was a grid of truth by which to renew culture, share her faith, and live in the fullness of her humanity. For Dayspring it supplied a reference point for all reality and a clarity of vision about the world. For Kevin it meant a fresh recognition of the incredible scope of redemption. For Jennifer it resulted in the breakdown of dualism and the cultivation of deep love for learning. In short, these individuals have undergone a significant, spiritual transformation through their encounter with a biblical worldview involving the revitalization of their hearts and the formation of a new kind of Christian mind. See my *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, pp. 343-344.

also find themselves culturally relevant and transformative (God comes down into the church and sends believers out into the world). Third and finally, it is this robust, holistic worldview version of the Christian faith that Baptist agencies ought to investigate to provide a comprehensive foundation to their ministries of mercy (orphanages) and to their educational enterprises (at the secondary, collegiate and graduate levels).

And this list could perhaps continue. But let me say in conclusion that the final credit for this robust, holistic, worldview version of the Christian faith as comprehensively influential goes not to Abraham Kuyper or James Orr or to J.C. (John Calvin), but rather the final credit and praise belongs only to the real J.C. to Jesus Christ, for at the end of the day, this is not a sectarian Calvinism, but Biblicist Christianity that clearly ascribes all glory, honor and praise to our God.

Here are four books that might be helpful in this spiritual and intellectual journey:

- Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (IVP, 1984)
- Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 1985)
- Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* (Tyndale, 1999)
- Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (Crossway, 2005)

Additional Questions:

1. How does Calvinism relate to our biblical hermeneutic today?

A response to this question, of course, depends on what is meant by “Calvinism.” Whether it is deemed primarily to be soteriological system or a “worldview” will make a big hermeneutical difference. But to get at this issue, let me quote an aphorism often attributed to Mark Twain: “that if all you have in your hand is a hammer, then everything begins to look like a nail.” The point of this statement is that the presuppositions and assumptions (some theological) we hold in advance will affect our interpretations of things, especially Scripture texts in an hermeneutical circle. In other words, if five point Calvinism is your “hammer,” then chances are high you will interpret the Bible in terms of this form of Calvinism, held in advance.

On the other hand, if your Calvinistic “hammer” is that of a comprehensive worldview based on the biblical narratives of creation, fall, and redemption, then with the help of the discipline of biblical theology and its covenants of creation and redemption, you will probably understand Scripture as the progressive unfolding of the mighty acts of God in history, culminating in Christ and His kingdom and church with a Christological and ecclesiological focus. In other words, we can’t understand the particular stories of Scripture with first understanding the overarching story of Scripture and the comprehensive work of God in history.

2. How does a Calvinistic worldview help or hurt us in reaching a postmodern culture?

For rebellious human beings reveling in their autonomy, claims of religious authority and exclusivism have never gone over well. Combining postmodern relativism, multi-culturalism, and calls for almost total tolerance with predestinarian Calvinism is bound to create an explosion, especially among Christianity's postmodern cultural despisers. As David Van Biema concluded his Time magazine article about the new Calvinism as the third of ten key ideas change the world today, "It will be interesting to see whether Calvinism's latest legacy will be classic Protestant backbiting or whether ... more Christians searching for security will submit their wills to the austere demanding God of the country's infancy." Of course, and rightly so, a Calvinist's response to this would be that this is nothing new, that God's call is unconditional and His grace irresistible.

Calvinism as a worldview, on the other hand, may have some advantages in reaching a postmodern culture for these reasons: (1) It capitalizes on the postmodern love for stories in presenting the overarching biblical story of creation, fall, and redemption in a creative, imaginative way. (2) It shows how the Christian faith is a life-affirming, culture-embracing, question-answering, humanizing faith, much to the surprise of many postmodern denizens. (3) It relishes beauty and the arts, a definite postmodern sensibility. As Abraham Kuyper said in his *Lectures on Calvinism*, "As the image-bearers of God, human beings have the capacity to create something beautiful and to delight in it."

3. Why is Calvinism increasing in popularity, especially among younger pastors?

- (1.) Because it satisfies a deep longing for transcendence found in the sovereign God and His glory in the context of a culture swamped with purely immanent, this worldly cares and concerns.
- (2.) Because it provides a solid biblical and theological basis for counter-cultural cultural engagement and transformation, so that adherents can be against the world and yet for the world.
- (3.) Because it possesses an intellectual appeal and spiritual depth over-against a reigning Christian anti-intellectualism and general evangelical superficiality.
- (4.) Because it is a high commitment Christianity, an intense, biblical/theological serious, morally rigorous, spiritual mature version of the Christian faith.
- (5.) Because it offers cogent explanations for our wonder at the natural world in creation, for understanding the depth of our brokenness and pain because of our sin, and our hope for restoration and renewal through Christian redemption.
- (6.) Because it provides for a deeper connection to the history of the church, a sense of communion with the saints across generations, and participation in one of the great traditions of the church.

4. What implications of Calvinism for missions and evangelism should we consider?

One Baptist theologian once said: "Wherever Calvinism has spread, interest in missions and evangelism has decreased proportionately." Of course, soteriological Calvinists would demur. John Piper, for example, has argued that Christianity's most energetic missionaries and evangelists have been of Calvinist persuasion (George Whitfield, William Carey, etc.). They are motivated in mission to bring the elect to faith, as the Lord encouraged a despondent Paul to do during his ministry at Corinth (see Acts 18: 9-10). Worldview Calvinists would be sympathetic to this evangelistic zeal, adding that, once saved, believers should be urged to discover their callings from God, embodying and honoring the gospel in all aspects of their everyday, ordinary lives, contributing to the common good, and serving as agents of the kingdom of God in the transformation of culture.