

TRUTH, TRUST, and TESTIMONY in a TIME of TENSION
A Statement from the Calvinism Advisory Committee

2013 Calvinism Advisory Committee report as submitted to the Executive Committee of the SBC

Southern Baptists are Great Commission people. We are also a doctrinal people, and those doctrinal convictions undergird our Great Commission vision and passion. We are a confessional people, who stand together upon the doctrines most vital to us all, confessed together in ***The Baptist Faith and Message***.

Within this common confession, we sometimes disagree over certain theological issues that should not threaten our Great Commission cooperation. We recognize that significant theological disagreement on such issues has occurred with respect to Calvinism. It is, therefore, our responsibility to come together with open hearts and minds in order to speak truthfully, honestly, and respectfully about these theological and doctrinal issues that concern us, threaten to divide us, and compel us into conversation. Such engagement is appropriate at every level of Southern Baptist life including local congregations, associations, state conventions, and the Southern Baptist Convention.

This spirit of conversation has been the hallmark of the meetings of the Calvinism Advisory Committee. We have spent hours together in fruitful, respectful, and candid conversation. We entered these conversations as brothers and sisters in Christ and as faithful and thankful Southern Baptists. Our purpose was neither to resolve centuries of doctrinal disagreement nor to consume ourselves with doctrinal debate. Our purpose was to suggest a course for moving forward together while taking seriously and representing fairly the theological diversity that exists in and has been the strength of Southern Baptist life.

Four central issues have become clear to us as we have met together. We affirm together that Southern Baptists must stand without apology upon ***truth***; that we do indeed have some challenging but not insurmountable points of ***tension***; that we must work together with ***trust***; and that we must encourage one another to ***testimony***.

TRUTH

The Bible

We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are the inerrant, infallible, and totally trustworthy Word of God and our supreme authority on all matters of truth. We affirm that the

Gospel of Jesus Christ is the great theme of all Scripture and that the Bible is sufficient to reveal all we need to know concerning God's purpose to save sinners.

We deny that any human system of thought or any theological tradition can assume supreme authority or be allowed to supplant dependence upon the Bible and all that it reveals. Neither Calvinism nor non-Calvinism ought to be equated exclusively with sound Southern Baptist doctrine nor be considered inconsistent with it.

The Lostness of Humanity

We affirm that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and that the universal condition of humanity is lostness, as every single human being, Jesus alone excepted, is a sinner whose only hope of salvation is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We deny that any human being is without need of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and we deny any teaching that minimizes the truth about sin and the need of all persons to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Power of the Gospel

We affirm that our Lord is mighty to save and that He saves to the uttermost. We affirm the power of the Gospel to redeem every single human being through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom the Father has now declared to be both Lord and Christ, the Savior of the world.

We deny that the Gospel is without power to save anyone who repents and believes in Jesus Christ. We also deny that the Gospel as revealed in Scripture lacks anything needful for our salvation.

The Offer of the Gospel

We affirm that the Gospel is to be made known freely to all in the good faith offer that if anyone confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord and believes in his heart that God has raised Christ from the dead, he will be saved.

We deny that the Gospel lacks any power to save anyone who believes in Christ and receives Him as Savior and Lord. Anyone who understands the Gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit may, in prayer and petition, trust Christ through repentance and faith, and we should plead with all sinners to do so.

The Exclusivity of the Gospel

We affirm that salvation is found in the name of Christ and in no other name. We affirm that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and that no one can come to the

Father but by Him. We affirm the exclusivity of the Gospel of Christ as the only message of salvation.

We deny that salvation can come to any sinner by any other gospel, any other system of faith and practice, or by any name other than Jesus Christ.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

We affirm that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross was both penal and substitutionary and that the atonement He accomplished was sufficient for the sins of the entire world.

We deny that there is anything lacking in the atonement of Christ to provide for the salvation of anyone.

The Reality of Heaven and Hell

We affirm that all who come to Christ by faith will be with Him forever in heaven, which He has prepared for the saints. We affirm that all who reject Christ and do not come to Him by faith will spend eternity in hell, a place of eternal punishment.

We deny that there is any opportunity for salvation after the point of death, when all humanity will face the judgment of God.

The Necessity of Conversion

We affirm that salvation involves the conversion of the sinner, whereby the sinner consciously clings to Christ by faith, repents of sin, believes the promises of the Gospel, and publicly professes faith in Christ. We affirm the necessity of conversion and the truth that conversion involves the will of the believer as well as the will of God.

We deny that salvation comes to anyone who has not experienced conversion. We also deny that salvation comes to any sinner who does not will to believe and receive Christ.

The Great Commission

We affirm the church's duty to obey Christ by preaching the Gospel to all the nations and by making disciples who obey all that Christ has commanded. We affirm every believer's responsibility to tell anyone and everyone about Jesus and the responsibility of every congregation to be a sending, going, and giving assembly of believers.

We deny that missions and evangelism can be neglected without denying the power of the Gospel; that any church can be faithful without a missionary urgency; and that any believer can be obedient without telling others about Jesus. We deny that evangelism can exist apart from the call to make disciples. Every sinner should be implored to trust

Christ by calling on Him through repentance and faith, and every convert should be disciplined toward maturity, commitment to the church, and passion for the lost.

TENSIONS

Although we are committed to these central truths, we recognize that within them there are tensions:

- God desires for all to come to repentance, yet not all do.
- Humans are ruined by the Fall, yet required to respond in faith.
- God is sovereign in salvation, yet individuals are still held responsible for their reception or rejection of the Gospel.
- Southern Baptist identity has often been connected to Calvinism, yet has often significantly modified it.

These are just a few of the dynamics at work in Southern Baptist faith and practice. While these tensions can be a source of frustration, especially when we are uncharitable toward those with whom we disagree, they have also been a great benefit to us, reminding us that God's ways are higher than ours, that no systematic construct can ever contain the fullness of Scriptural truth, that it is we and not the Bible who are subject to error, that we should approach the Word with both fidelity to the past and readiness for further reformation, and that it is better to live in the tensions of unanswered questions than to ignore or adjust some part of the whole counsel of God.

With a full recognition of the limitless wisdom of God's Word and the limited wisdom of ourselves, we urge Southern Baptists to grant one another liberty in those areas within ***The Baptist Faith and Message*** where differences in interpretation cause us to disagree. For instance,

- We agree that God loves everyone and desires to save everyone, but we differ as to why only some are ultimately saved.
- While we all heartily affirm the article on election in ***The Baptist Faith and Message*** (Article V), we differ as to whether the response of faith plays a role in one's election.
- We agree that the penal and substitutionary death of Christ was sufficient for the sins of the entire world, but we differ as to whether Jesus actually substituted for the sins of all people or only the elect.
- We agree that the Gospel should be proclaimed to everyone, but we differ as to whether or how every hearer will be enabled to respond.

- We agree that everyone has inherited Adam’s hopelessly fallen sin nature, but we differ as to whether we also inherit his guilt.
- We agree that men and women are sinners, but we differ about the effects of sin on the mind and the will.
- We recognize the differences among us between those who believe that sin nullifies freedom to respond to the Gospel and those who believe that freedom to respond to the Gospel is marred but not nullified.
- We agree that God is absolutely sovereign in initiating salvation, uniting the believer to Himself, and preserving the believer to the end, but we differ as to how God expresses His sovereignty with respect to human freedom.
- We agree that the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel enables sinners to be saved, but we differ as to whether this grace is resistible or irresistible.
- We agree on the necessity of regeneration that results in God-ordained, Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered obedience from the heart, but differ as to whether faith precedes regeneration or regeneration precedes faith.
- We agree that most Southern Baptists believe that those who die before they are capable of moral action go to heaven through the grace of God and the atonement of Christ, even as they differ as to why this is so.

These differences should spur us to search the Scriptures more dutifully, to engage in lively interaction for mutual sharpening and collective Gospel effectiveness, and to give thanks that what we hold in common far surpasses that on which we disagree. But these particular differences do not constitute a sufficient basis for division and must not be allowed to hamper the truly crucial cooperative effort of taking the Gospel to a waiting world. Southern Baptists who stand on either side of these issues should celebrate the freedom to hold their views with passion while granting others the freedom to do the same.

TRUST

Cooperation

We affirm that Southern Baptists stand together in a commitment to cooperate in Great Commission ministries. We affirm that, from the very beginning of our denominational life, Calvinists and nonCalvinists have cooperated together. We affirm that these differences should not threaten our eager cooperation in Great Commission ministries.

We deny that the issues now discussed among us should in any way undermine or hamper our work together if we grant one another liberty and extend to one another charity in these differences. Neither those insisting that Calvinism should dominate Southern Baptist identity nor those who call for its elimination should set the course for

our life together.

Confession

We affirm that ***The Baptist Faith and Message***, as adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 2000, stands as a sufficient and truthful statement of those doctrines most certainly held among us. We affirm that this confession of faith is to serve as the doctrinal basis for our cooperation in Great Commission ministry.

We deny that any human statement stands above Holy Scripture as our authority. We also deny that *The Baptist Faith and Message* is insufficient as the doctrinal basis for our cooperation. Other Baptist Confessions are not to be lenses through which ***The Baptist Faith and Message*** is to be read. ***The Baptist Faith and Message*** alone is our expression of common belief.

Friendship

We affirm the responsibility of every Southern Baptist to be a friend to all Southern Baptists, so long as we all stand within ***The Baptist Faith and Message***. We affirm that Southern Baptists must avoid the development of a party spirit amongst us, with friendships and trust extended only to those who are in agreement with us.

We deny that issues related to Calvinism or non-Calvinism should alienate or estrange Southern Baptists from each other. Instead, we will extend to one another the mutual respect befitting the bonds of fellowship that hold us together.

Conversation

We affirm the responsibility of all Southern Baptists to guard our conversation so that we do not speak untruthfully, irresponsibly, harshly, or unkindly to or about any other Southern Baptist. This negativity is especially prevalent in the use of social media, and we encourage the exercise of much greater care in that context.

We deny that our cooperation can be long sustained if our conversation becomes untruthful, uncharitable, or irresponsible.

TESTIMONY

We affirm the responsibility and privilege of every Southern Baptist to advocate his or her doctrinal convictions. We affirm that theology should be honored and privileged in our conversations and cooperation. We also affirm that theological and doctrinal debate can be a sign of great health within a denomination that is devoted to truth and is

characterized by trust.

We deny that the main purpose of the Southern Baptist Convention is theological debate. We further deny that theological discussion can be healthy if our primary aim is to win an argument, to triumph in a debate, or to draw every denominational meeting into a conversation over conflicted issues. Of more significance to our life together than any allegiance to Calvinism or non-Calvinism should be our shared identity as Southern Baptists.

Most importantly, we affirm together that our testimony to the world must be the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—and that Southern Baptists must stand together in the testimony that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We stand together to declare that salvation comes to all who call upon the name of the Lord, and that God’s desire is for the salvation of sinners and the reaching of the nations.

Moving Forward

Where do we go from here? We must celebrate the unity we share together in our common Great Commission purpose, while acknowledging and celebrating variety among us. We must clarify the parameters of our cooperation where necessary but stand together without dispute.

We should be thankful that these are the issues Southern Baptists are now discussing, even as liberal denominations are debating the full abdication of biblical morality and allowing the denial of central doctrines. We are, seen in this light, blessed by the discussions that come to Southern Baptists who want to affirm the fullness of the faith, not its reduction.

We should call upon all Southern Baptists to promote the unity we share within **The Baptist Faith and Message** and, while recognizing that most Southern Baptists will believe and teach more than what that confession contains, we must never believe or teach less.

We should expect all leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention and all entities serving our denomination to affirm, to respect, and to represent all Southern Baptists of good faith and to serve the great unity of our Convention. No entity should be promoting Calvinism or non-Calvinism to the exclusion of the other. Our entities should be places where any Southern Baptist who stands within the boundaries of **The Baptist Faith and Message** should be welcomed and affirmed as they have opportunities to benefit from, participate in, and provide leadership for those entities.

In order to prevent the rising incidence of theological conflict in the churches, we should expect all candidates for ministry positions in the local church to be fully candid and forthcoming about all matters of faith and doctrine, even as we call upon pulpit and staff search committees to be fully candid and forthcoming about their congregation and its expectations.

We must do all within our power to avoid the development of partisan divisions among Southern Baptists.

We must not only acknowledge but celebrate the distinctive contributions made by the multiple streams of our Southern Baptist heritage. These streams include both Charleston and Sandy Creek, the Reformers and many of the advocates of the Radical Reformation, confessional evangelicalism and passionate revivalism. These streams and their tributaries nourish us still.

We must also remember that labels, though often necessary, are often misleading and unfair. They must be used with care and assigned with charity. The use of the words “Calvinist” and “Calvinism” can be both revealing and misleading, since individuals may hold to any number of variants on doctrinal points. Similarly non-Calvinists, who may resist even that designation, will cover an even larger landscape of positions. Labels like these often fail us.

We must stand together in rejecting any form of hyper-Calvinism that denies the mandate to present the offer of the Gospel to all sinners or that denies the necessity of a human response to the Gospel that involves the human will. Similarly, we must reject any form of Arminianism that elevates the human will above the divine will or that denies that those who come to faith in Christ are kept by the power of God. How do we know that these positions are to be excluded from our midst? Each includes beliefs that directly deny what ***The Baptist Faith and Message*** expressly affirms.

We must remember that the diversity we celebrate is already honored in the names we revere—theological statesmen such as James P. Boyce and B. H. Carroll, E. Y. Mullins and W. T. Conner; missionary heroes and martyrs such as Lottie Moon and Bill Wallace; scholars such as A. T. Robertson and Robert Baker, educators such as Lee Scarborough and John Sampey; evangelists and preachers like George W. Truett and W. A. Criswell, R. G. Lee and Adrian Rogers; and pastor-theologians like Herschel Hobbs. Where would we be today if we attempted to divide these heroes and heroines of the faith by the issue of Calvinism? We would cut ourselves off from our own heritage.

We must also remember that a rising young generation of Southern Baptists is watching and listening, looking to see if this denomination is going to be a bold movement of

churches on mission or merely a debating society.

Beyond them stands a world desperately in need of the Gospel. Will we distract ourselves in an unnecessary debate while the world is perishing in need of the Gospel? If we stand together in truth, we can trust one another in truth, even as we experience tension. We can talk like brothers and sisters in Christ, and we can work urgently and eagerly together.

We have learned that we can have just this kind of conversation together, and we invite all Southern Baptists to join together in this worthy spirit of conversation. But let us not neglect the task we are assigned. The world desperately needs to hear the promise of the Gospel.

Respectfully submitted,

The Calvinism Advisory Committee

<http://www.sbclife.net/Articles/2013/06/sla5>

SBC Life - Online article that provides the committee members