

What In The World Is Calvinism? (II)

“May they be brought to COMPLETE UNITY to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.” John 17:23b

In a previous newsletter article (2/20/08), I introduced the topic of “Calvinism”. The reason that I am taking the time to discuss the “theology” behind “Calvinism” is because Southern Baptist, traditionally, have strongly disagreed with the primary Calvinists’ views on the roles that God’s “love” and man’s “free will” play in the “opportunity” and “application” of salvation to a person’s soul. Since the main thing that unites all Southern Baptist together has been “sharing the gospel with the lost”, when there is a disagreement on what the gospel actually is and who this gospel is really for...then the “cooperation” amongst Southern Baptist in sharing “the” gospel could be in jeopardy. Our strength in evangelizing the lost is in our UNITY and common agreement on the ESSENTIAL doctrines of our faith. Calvinism is a real threat to that unity and could lead to a “weakening” of our efforts to advance the kingdom of God throughout the world as we have been commanded (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).

Although Calvinism has been around for many centuries, its effects on Southern Baptist have been somewhat minimized by the excellent biblical scholarship and apologetics of previous Southern Baptist pastors and Convention leaders. However, over the past 20+ years, Calvinism is reportedly making a comeback within our midst. A recent “Baptist Courier” article said that many new pastors are coming out of our six Southern Baptist Seminaries with a Calvinistic view towards salvation and missions.

This should lead all concerned disciples of Jesus Christ to ask questions like: “What in the world is Calvinism?”, “What effect will it have on the average lay person sitting in the pew of a typical Southern Baptist Church?”, “Why should I care if I end up with a pastor who is a Calvinist?”, etc., etc. Since I am your “elected” pastor, and since I do not agree with the doctrines of Calvinism, I believe it is my responsibility to explain to you what Calvinism is, why I don’t agree with it, and why I will not allow it to have influence amongst our teachings here at Northbridge for as long as you give me the privilege to be your pastor.

Now, before we begin discussing what Calvinism is...let me start by sharing with you a little of the history behind who John Calvin was. John Calvin was born in Noyon, France in 1509 (near the start of the Protestant Reformation). Although his father worked for a bishop within the Catholic Church and John received a Master of Art’s in Catholic Theology in Paris, John Calvin was influenced by the arguments of the Protestants to such a degree that he declined a lucrative position within the Catholic Church and instead went on to get a law degree while he began getting more involved with the Protestant movement. In October of 1534, the king of France began a campaign to purge Paris and the rest of France from all “heretics” who were against the Church of Rome. So at 25 years old, John Calvin had to flee France or risk being “burned” to death by an Inquisition.

After leaving France, John settled in a city in Switzerland called Basel. While in Basel, he began to write some of the most exhaustive and complete summaries of Protestant viewpoints of Scripture that can be found anywhere in Protestant literature. “The Institutes of Christian Religion”, as his published works became known in 1536, were well accepted and distributed throughout Europe. This scholarly work made Calvin a significant enemy of the Catholic Church. John used “The Institutes” to not only argue the Protestants’ biblical views on topics such as “salvation by faith”, “the incarnation of Christ”, “the Trinity”, etc., etc.; but he also used “The Institutes” to criticize commonly believed non-biblical Catholic doctrines such as “infant baptism”, “salvation by works”, and “purgatory”.

Although his writings made him popular amongst Protestants, John Calvin did not intend on taking any leadership role in the movement. He viewed himself as being more of a quiet theologian, rather than a fiery pastor or a motivational leader of men. His original intentions were to move to Germany and spend the rest of his life in peace, while he continued to write summaries of biblical doctrines.

However, a war between France and Germany broke out in 1536. This forced John Calvin to move to Geneva, Switzerland, where he pretty much lived until he died in 1564. It is in Geneva, that John Calvin solidified his doctrines and actually worked with city government to enforce his rigid view of Christianity. Because he was so sick of the liberal viewpoints and lifestyles of the common Catholic laity, John used the government (and, when needed, law enforcement) of Switzerland to enforce his non-tolerant doctrinal viewpoints and to maintain church discipline. Any citizen of the state who did not frequently attend weekly worship services or live in a manner Calvin believed was appropriate for those claiming to be Christians, John would have them either “beaten” and/or “excommunicated” from the Protestant church fellowship. And for those who questioned his theology, John demonstrated an even more intolerant position.

For example, in May of 1555, there was an attempted uprising amongst Protestants in Switzerland because Calvin had excluded some prominent civic leaders from participating in the Lord’s Supper because they were friendly with some critics of his theology. Leaders of the small rebellion were forced to flee along with anyone who did not agree with every “tenant” of Calvinism, which included a partial agreement to the Catholic Church’s viewpoints on “transubstantiation” (which is the belief that the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper actually BECOME the real body and blood of Jesus Christ). Four of the most prominent leaders of the “protestors” of Calvinism in Switzerland were captured before they could leave the country. When they were brought before a brief and one-sided trial, Calvin proclaimed them the “henchmen of Satan” and had them beheaded, quartered, and their body parts hung in strategic locations as a warning to any future opponents to Calvinist doctrines. John justified this rough treatment by saying: *“Those who do not correct evil when they can do so and their office requires it...are guilty of it.” (1)*

Thus, Calvinism is a system of beliefs based on the biblical interpretations of John Calvin, who was so convinced that his views on Scripture were correct, that he felt justified by God to literally “kill” those who opposed his views. Next week, we will see what some of Calvin’s beliefs were that many Protestants thought it was worth dying for to refute.

–Pastor Louis

(1) *Calvin: A Biography*; Bernard Cottret, page 200.