

## Happy Southern Baptists and the Tricky Track

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One of the better things that Karl Barth is sometimes credited with having said, is “God, deliver me from Barthians.” If not apocryphal, Barth was simply recognizing what most professors acknowledge and that is that students always have a tendency to run to the edge of the cliff with the professor, but unlike the professor they tend never to stop at the edge. While Martin Luther was the Reformation’s preacher-theologian, John Calvin was the towering figure of Reformation thought through his *Institutes* and through his commentaries, a monumental biblical interpreter. Calvin’s contribution, like that of Luther and a myriad of others, are subjects for which Baptists should be eternally grateful.

This should not be interpreted to mean however that we agree with John Calvin on all points and still less with some of his followers, who may have tumbled past him off the edge of the cliff. For example, Baptists have disagreed with the Reformed tradition of John Calvin and others at the following substantive points.

- First, Baptists disagree about the baptism of infants. Infants cannot have faith, and the first ordinance of the church is faith-witness baptism and hence only believers are the appropriate candidates.
- Second, we disagree about the mode of baptism, insisting that only baptism by immersion expresses death, burial, and resurrection.
- Third, we have differed with Calvin and other Magisterial Reformers over the relationship of the church to the state. Magisterial Reformers, so called, because of linking their reformations to state support and protection are contrasted normally with the Radical Reformers who argued as Baptist always have, for separation of church and state. This should not be interpreted as meaning that the church is not free to address matters of moral concern in the state, but only that the state has no jurisprudence in matters of the church and that the two are separate realms altogether.
- Fourth, Baptists have disagreed with the Reformed tradition regarding elder rule. Although it is not uncommon now to find Baptist churches advocating elder rule and while this has been the case among Baptists for generations, on the whole Baptists are Congregationalists—recognizing as they do the problems latent in congregational rule, they nonetheless believe that the doctrine of the indwelling Spirit of God in each believer means, among other things, that the congregation as a whole should be consulted and indeed determinative in the major decisions of the local church. Part of this is tied to Baptist emphasis upon the autonomy of the local church.

On the other hand, there are matters about which almost all Baptists agree with the Reformed tradition.

- Baptists have joined Calvin and other Reformers in insisting that salvation is by grace alone. Indeed it is arguable that the Radical Reformers were the only really consistent Reformers because they not only declared that salvation came by grace alone, but also insisted that only those who had experienced that grace in regeneration were the proper subjects of baptism.
- Second, Baptists join with Reformers in believing that election to salvation is a prerogative exercised by God who is both just and sovereign in his disposition of all things. While even the followers of Calvin disagree among themselves about various aspects of election (infralapsarian vs. supralapsarian perspectives), Baptists also disagree among themselves about exactly what election means and how it functions in the salvific process. Nonetheless, that the Bible teaches the doctrine of election and predestination means that Baptists fully endorse it.
- Further, Baptists have almost unanimously joined with the Reformers in their belief of the permanence of salvation. Once a man has experienced regeneration and been permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit, he cannot forfeit his salvation. Again, Baptists joined with Reformed theology in declaring the full sovereignty of God over all events. This includes the rejection of “open theism” which features an incredulous God when faced with certain unanticipated events.
- Finally, Baptists are one with those of the Reformed faith and with Calvinists in emphasizing the overriding providences of God. The cosmos is simply not out of control. It is being guided by God to a designed climax over which He rules and reigns. Furthermore, God’s providence extends to all events in the lives of God’s children.

Baptists disagree among themselves over subjects such as what election means and how it should be interpreted. It is common to find disagreement over the so-called *ordo salutis*, that is, the order of salvation events. Most believe that repentance and faith occur simultaneously, along with regeneration, but some have held that regeneration occurs first and makes repentance and faith possible.

Some years ago, walking along a muddy river bank about six feet above a glacier melt ice cold river, I had the misfortune of being the last in line along a very narrow path made by a Brown Bear. Taking one unguarded step, the mud gave way and I found myself plunged into the ice-cold river. Having to walk all the way back to camp with my boots full of ice cold water, reminded me that it is always better to remain on the path, however tricky it may be.

Southern Baptists today need to negotiate a *tricky track* that, so far, historically they have rather remarkably been able to negotiate. The *tricky track* is to disagree about the meaning of election and certain other associated perspectives, without breaking fellowship with one another over

matters, however profoundly believed, which will not become decipherable for believers this side of heaven. I have a few modest proposals for successfully negotiating the *tricky track*.

- Non-Calvinists must not accuse Calvinists in general of being non-evangelistic. First this must not happen because it is simply not true. While a case can certainly be made that many embracing the Calvinistic perspective have apparently allowed this theology to have an unfortunate result in terms of actual evangelistic enterprise, one needs not look far to discover those who thoroughly embrace a more Calvinistic position who nevertheless have remained consistent in their witness and successful in their evangelistic endeavors. My concern here is not that non-Calvinists cease warning about the danger often seen as present in those who embrace a more Calvinistic perspective, but it is essential that Calvinistic Baptists not be painted with the universal brush in this matter.
- On the other hand, the more Calvinistic Baptists must not accuse non-Calvinists of failing to believe in the sovereignty of God. Almost every Baptist I know believes in the sovereignty of God. But for some, perhaps even for most, God's sovereignty does not entail a particular view of the doctrine of election. God is sufficiently sovereign to act in any way consistent with His character and essence.
- Third, there needs to be recognition on both sides of the argument—that in England, Particular Baptists and General Baptists experienced a great divorce, which was healthy for neither. As Timothy George has pointed out, the General Baptists lost their doctrinal emphasis and tended to become Universalists, and even in some cases Unitarian, whereas the Particular Baptists had a strong tendency toward becoming anti-missionary and anti-evangelistic. They needed each other and Southern Baptists so far have been able to understand that the two sides needed each other and hence we have thus far not made the British Baptist mistake. May God help us to maintain that heading.
- Fourth, absolute integrity must be the order of the day. Although I am not a conventional dispensationalist, most people consider me such. So if I'm being considered for a faculty position or a pastorate, I must be entirely candid with the appropriate authorities in the church. I must tell them every single aspect of my theological perspective and I must explain exactly how I will lead the church or teach my classes as the case may be. Anything less than full disclosure to the church or to an institution by which I shall be employed is a failure of integrity. This lack of integrity and full disclosure is that which disrupts churches and institutions and causes trouble that has the tendency to spill over into every aspect of denominational life. Again, if we handle this *tricky track*, we'll have to do it through full disclosure of theological position and what we intend to do.
- Finally, to negotiate the *tricky track*, we must not cease to be less than overtly and aggressively but nevertheless responsibly evangelistic. Some of the shallow evangelistic methodologies and over-confident reporting of results needs to be revised and the more Reformed brethren among us are faithful to provide those criticisms. The more aggressively evangelistic need to hear them carefully and be corrected by them. On the other hand, when churches report no baptisms each year or even churches numbering four

or five hundred members account for very few baptisms, the more aggressively evangelistic among us are not wrong to say that God should not be blamed for this. Human irresponsibility and a willingness to pass off our self-centered, non-evangelistic, non-missionary ways under the cloak of the sovereignty of God are simply reprehensible. Thorough-going, honest, but nonetheless aggressive evangelism is what God has blessed among Southern Baptists across the years, and we dare not let any perspective dissuade us from the example provided for us in the book of Acts and in the mandates of Jesus in such places as the Great Commission. Fairness also demands the recognition that the failure of churches in the evangelistic and missionary tasks often has nothing whatever to do with Calvinism.

A *tricky track* it is, and who knows how Baptists will come out in the end. But we need each other, and how we proceed can best be followed with something like the above perspective. May God bless us all and may God enable us to have a heart for reaching our world for Christ.