

THE GROWTH OF CALVINISM AMONG SOUTHERN BAPTISTS IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AND ITS EFFECT UPON BAPTIST CHURCH MUSIC

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Introduction

That the landscape of corporate worship among Southern Baptist churches in America has changed drastically in the last fifty years is an inescapable fact. Just as the surrounding secular culture has experienced turmoil and upheaval, many of the long-held worship traditions of all Christian denominations including Southern Baptists have come under scrutiny, reform, and in some cases, outright rejection. There have been a variety of responses to the sociological and philosophical changes in the secular society. Some churches have adopted an isolationist methodology and have fiercely rejected any type of change in musical style, tradition, or worship practice. Churches on the other end of the spectrum are barely recognizable in comparison to their counterparts merely twenty-five years ago with respect to musical style, instrumentation, staging, and vocal leadership.

Many of the developments within Southern Baptist life have been primarily reactions to the changes in personal taste, culture, and ideology of the surrounding world. This, however, is not the only agent of change within Southern Baptist churches throughout the past two decades. Following the turbulent Conservative Resurgence of the late twentieth century, there has been an increasing shift toward Calvinistic theologies in many of the churches in the Southern Baptist Convention. The rediscovery of the historical heritage of Baptist Calvinists by many churches has forced ministers of music

and church musicians to evaluate, change, and renew their worship practices in light of this theological stance. The growing controversy between Calvinists and non-Calvinists is often fraught with exaggeration, stereotype, and a general misunderstanding of the opposing theological and ecclesiastical viewpoints.

In order to gain a further understanding of the growing Calvinist resurgence among Southern Baptists, LifeWay Christian Resources and the North American Mission Board recently conducted surveys of Southern Baptist ministers to determine the true breadth of this theological phenomenon. The results of both surveys came to serve as the basis for the recent compilation *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue*. In that work, Ed Stetzer, President of LifeWay Research, states the following:

Calvinism is a growing influence among Southern Baptist leaders with about 10 percent affirming the five points of Calvinism. However, when we look at recent SBC seminary graduates who now serve as church pastors, nearly 30 percent identify themselves as Calvinists.¹

While it is impossible to ascertain the precise reasons for the growth of Calvinism among Southern Baptist churches, several factors emerge upon further examination. Timothy George sees a connection between the inerrancy controversy and Calvinism. “Once the question of biblical authority is settled, it becomes urgently important to investigate what the Bible actually teaches about salvation, grace, and election.”² One of the most important factors in the adoption of Calvinism among younger Southern Baptist

¹ Ed Stetzer, "Calvinism, Evangelism, and SBC Leadership," in *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2008), 13.

² Timothy George, "Southern Baptist Ghosts," *First Things*, no. 93 (May 1999): 23.

preachers is the widespread popularity of religious leaders such as John Piper, Albert Mohler, John MacArthur, and others. Piper, in particular, exerts tremendous influence through his affiliation with the Passion Conferences geared toward college students. Collin Hansen sees a connection between the Calvinist preaching of John Piper and the popular music emerging from these Passion Conferences.

Piper lends academic weight, moral authority, and theological precision to the conference....Worship songs from Charlie Hall and Chris Tomlin, preceding talks by [Louie] Giglio, pound home two themes beloved by Calvinists – God’s sovereignty and glory.³

Worship songs from these conferences have come to be among the most widely used songs for corporate worship in American churches, including such songs as *How Great Is Our God* and *Blessed Be Your Name*.

Defining the Terminology

Before any further investigation may be made into the current situation within Southern Baptist churches, it is necessary to define certain terms and the way in which they will be used in this paper. The term “Calvinism” itself is problematic in that it often immediately provokes an emotional reaction, yet fails to adequately describe a certain theology or viewpoint. Obviously the theological position is an outgrowth of the teaching of John Calvin, one of the pillars of the Protestant Reformation. While Calvin wrote copious volumes concerning the Scriptures, the church, society, and the Christian life, the term “Calvinism” has a more specific meaning. Tom Ascol, Executive Director

³ Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 17.

of Founders Ministries, elaborates on this distinction between “Calvinism” and the teachings of John Calvin.

Calvin’s views on infant baptism, church-state relationship, church officers, and government are rejected outright by many who would nevertheless describe themselves as Calvinists. “Calvinism” is a worldview. It sees creation, history and salvation from a God-centered perspective. In particular, “Calvinism” is used primarily as a soteriological term. It is a short-hand reference to those biblical doctrines that magnify the glory and grace of God in salvation.⁴

Another term commonly used to describe this theological position is “Reformed.” Again, this is problematic in that many denominational traditions stem from the Protestant Reformation and are inherently “reformed.” This difficulty is accentuated in the fact that the Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, Baptist, and other non-denominational traditions identify with the “Reformed” label. For the purposes of this paper, the term “Reformed” will be reserved for those faith traditions that subscribe to the full breadth of the teachings of John Calvin, not simply his soteriology. Doctrines such as paedobaptism, sacramental theology, and church polity are areas of disagreement between classical Reformed traditions and Southern Baptists. As Malcom Yarnell notes, these denominations would not be comfortable with terminology such as being “born again” and “evangelical language advocating a ‘personal relationship with Jesus Christ.’”⁵

⁴ Tom Ascol, "From the Protestant Reformation to the Southern Baptist Convention: What Hath Geneva to Do with Nashville?," *The Founders Journal*, no. 70 (Fall 2007): 6-7.

⁵ Malcom Yarnell, "Calvinism: Cause for Rejoicing, Cause for Concern," in *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2008), 63.

The Historical Development of Calvinism Among Baptists

In order to understand the current growth of Calvinism among Southern Baptists, it is important to have a basic understanding of the history of Baptist Calvinists. Most scholars identify John Smyth's self-baptism and subsequent baptism of several other adults as the genesis of the Baptist tradition. Smyth's convictions concerning "believer's baptism" developed from the Puritan and Separatist movements in England during the last half of the sixteenth century. There is some debate as to the soteriology of these first Baptists, but recent scholarship suggests that they did not identify with Calvinism explicitly. John Briggs notes that "seventeenth-century Baptists were essentially Reformed or Calvinistic Christians who admitted believers, on the declaration of their faith in baptism, into congregationally ordered churches."⁶ Tom Ascol elaborates on the common Calvinist heritage of Baptists by saying

Though they did not share the same ecclesiastical goal, Puritans, Separatists and Independents were all essentially English Calvinists. It is from this common source (perhaps with some influence from Continental Anabaptists) that the two streams of Baptists in England originated. One was Arminian and the other was Calvinistic.⁷

We find then that from their earliest roots, Baptists have been divided over the Calvinist issue. Although the General Baptists were in fact the first Baptist churches in England, their influence began to wane as they drifted away from Arminianism into Unitarianism in the beginning of the seventeenth century. The Particular Baptists continued to grow and in 1644, seven Particular Baptist churches in London met together and produced

⁶ John Briggs, "The Influence of Calvinism on Seventeenth-Century English Baptists," *Baptist History and Heritage*, Spring 2004: 10.

⁷ Ascol, 10.

what would come to be known as the *First London Confession*, which would later serve as the model for several Calvinistic Baptist confessions of faith.

Roger Williams is credited with the founding of the first American Baptist church in Providence, Rhode Island in 1639. Both General and Particular Baptists could be found in the colonies in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but two Calvinistic associations of churches, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Charleston, South Carolina, emerged as powerful voices in Baptist life. The Particular Baptists, however, quickly became the majority in American Baptist life, as Philip Thompson notes,

John Asplund's *Annual Register of the Baptist Denomination* (1790) showed that in the late eighteenth century, of thirty-five associations in the United States and frontier territories, seventeen formally subscribed to the Westminster Calvinism of the *Philadelphia Confession*, and nine more held to the "Calvinistic system" or "Calvinistic sentiment."⁸

Yet Arminianism among Baptists did not fall away completely, and with the Great Awakenings of the 1700s and 1800s, it found a home in the Sandy Creek Association in North Carolina. These Separate Baptist churches experienced rapid growth as a result of the revivals in the South, and were notable for their zeal for evangelism. The Sandy Creek Tradition played a large role in the development of the Southern Baptist Convention and shaped much of its theology. "In particular, the individualism of the American frontier and the Separate Baptist revivalistic legacy characterized the methods, and eventually the theology, of Southern Baptist missions and

⁸ Philip E. Thompson, "Baptists and "Calvinism": Discerning the Shape of the Questions," *Baptist History and Heritage*, Spring 2004: 62.

evangelism.”⁹

In May 1845, the Southern Baptist Convention came into being as delegates from both Particular (or Regular) and Separate Baptist churches in the south joined in cooperation. The majority of the historical evidence points to a strong Calvinist sentiment among these first Southern Baptist churches. This Calvinist leaning is evident in the founding of many of the familiar Southern Baptist entities. David Dockery notes that “the early years of the Convention, including the founding faculty at Southern Seminary were largely shaped by the Charleston Tradition.”¹⁰ A gradual shift from Calvinism began in the late nineteenth century and accelerated during the first half of the twentieth-century, led by influential theologians such as E.Y. Mullins and W.T. Connor. It is also important not to underestimate the influence of the revivalism of Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham.¹¹ Much of Southern Baptist worship practice bears greater resemblance to this pattern of the evangelistic worship service than to more historical Baptist models. Upon this historical foundation, the current Calvinist resurgence emerged and has begun to impact Southern Baptist life in dramatic and often controversial ways.

⁹ C. Douglas Weaver and Nathan A. Finn, "Youth for Calvin: Reformed Theology and Baptist Collegians," *Baptist History and Heritage*, Spring 2004: 41.

¹⁰ David Dockery, "Southern Baptists and Calvinism," in *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2008), 35.

¹¹ Raymond Bailey, "The Changing Face of Baptist Worship," *Review and Expositor*, no. 95 (1998): 49.

Survey Methodology and Content

In order to gauge the impact of this Calvinist resurgence upon the worship practices of Southern Baptist churches, the author conducted a survey of Southern Baptist churches across nine states. Group A consists of churches that self-identify with the Founders Ministries, an organization which describes itself as a “ministry of teaching and encouragement promoting both doctrine and devotion expressed in the Doctrines of Grace and their experiential application to the local church, particularly in the areas of worship and witness.”¹² In order to affiliate with Founders Ministries, a church must at a minimum have “a pastor who is able to subscribe to one of the historic baptistic confessions” which are identified as the *Abstract of Principles*, *Second London Baptist Confession (1689)*, *First London Baptist Confession (1644)*, or the *New Hampshire Confession*.¹³ Although membership in the Southern Baptist Convention is not a requirement for affiliation with Founders Ministries, the survey was only disseminated to churches who are members of the SBC. Group B consists of a random sampling of Southern Baptist churches in the same states as those in Group A. This control group provides the basis for comparison between the worship practices of churches with a distinctive Calvinist theology and those who make no such distinction.

Pastors, ministers of music, and church musicians of the various churches in both groups were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the survey. The

¹² *About Us*, <http://www.founders.org/info/about.html> (accessed September 15, 2009).

¹³ *Founders-Friendly Churches*, <http://www.founders.org/misc/chlist> (accessed September 15, 2009).

surveys were available online for completion for a period of four weeks and the anonymous submissions were then compiled and separated by group. The survey instrument is divided into three primary sections: (1) Basic Church Demographic Information, (2) General Worship Service Questions, and (3) General Music Related Questions.

Basic Church Demographic Information

In the first section of questions, the participants provided essential information concerning the church location, average Sunday morning worship attendance, community type, and average congregational age range. Group A consists of thirty-five churches in seven different states, whereas Group B consists of twenty churches in four states. Table 1 details the average Sunday morning worship attendance for churches in both groups.

Table 1: Average Sunday Morning Worship Attendance

Group A			Group B		
<i>N</i>	Percentage	Average Morning Attendance	<i>N</i>	Percentage	Average Morning Attendance
8	22.90%	0 – 50	0	0.00%	0 – 50
7	20.00%	51 - 100	0	0.00%	51 - 100
9	25.70%	101 – 250	3	15.00%	101 – 250
8	22.90%	251 – 500	5	25.00%	251 – 500
2	5.70%	501 – 750	3	15.00%	501 – 750
1	2.90%	751 – 1000	0	0.00%	751 – 1000
0	0.00%	1000 +	9	45.00%	1000 +

The fact that the majority of the churches in Group A consisted of congregations with less than five hundred members in weekly attendance provides important insight concerning their musical and worship practices. Churches in Group B

may simply have access to more resources (both personnel and financial) than their counterparts in Group A, and, therefore, their corporate worship services might feature different elements. While the majority of responses in both groups indicated that their churches were in suburban settings, 23 percent of the responses of Group A indicated a rural setting, while none of the Group B respondents indicated such. This perhaps provides another level of understanding into their later responses.

General Worship Service Questions

In the second section of the survey instrument, respondents encountered questions concerning the various musical and non-musical elements of their worship services. These questions were chosen specifically to gauge the usage of worship elements traditionally found in Reformed churches, such as corporate confession of sin and the reassurance of forgiveness, usage of public confessions of faith, corporate reading of scripture, and the usage of the Doxology in worship. Other questions included the frequency of the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the presence of altar calls, and the involvement of pastoral leadership in worship planning.

Several surprising results arose from the analysis of the collected data. First, churches in Group A placed a higher emphasis on the public reading of Scripture by their congregation than did those in Group B. (97 percent versus 80 percent). And of those positive responses in Group A, 91 percent of them indicated that their congregations corporately read Scripture weekly in worship. Secondly, times of corporate confession and the reassurance of the forgiveness of sins were found more frequently in churches in Group A (57 percent) than in Group B (35 percent). Group A churches were also more

likely to use public confessional statements of faith in worship (49 percent) than churches in Group B (30 percent). These results are consistent with the expectation that the worship practices of Group A would more closely correspond with traditional “Reformed Worship.”

One area in which the Calvinist theology of Group A is evident is found in the responses to the question, “Does your church have a time in which non-believers can make public professions of faith?” 37 percent of the churches in Group A responded “no,” while 85 percent of the churches in Group B answered “yes.” The issue of altar calls and evangelism in worship is one of the areas of sharpest disagreements between Calvinists and non-Calvinists. The churches in which the freedom of the human will and its role in salvation is emphasized exhibit a much higher likelihood to extend an invitation to come to faith during a corporate worship service.

Lastly, the influence of the pastor over the worship and musical design of the corporate worship service is greater in churches from Group A than Group B. 60 percent of the responses in Group A indicated that the senior pastor was involved in some way with the worship planning, and 29 percent of the churches indicated that the senior pastor was solely responsible for the worship design. Only 35 percent of their pastoral counterparts in Group B were involved in worship planning, and all of those were in conjunction with the Minister of Music or Worship Leader.

General Music Related Questions

The final area of inquiry dealt with such areas as musical style, the usage of psalmody in worship, instrumentation, theology in music, and musical resources. The

first question in this section asked the respondents to indicate the phrase that best described their congregation's musical style. As we can see in Table 2, the majority of both groups indicated a "blended" style, but 20 percent of Group B selected "Modern Worship/Praise & Worship" and 23 percent of Group A chose "Traditional" when describing their services.

Table 2: Congregational Musical Style

Group A			Group B		
N	Percentage	Musical Style	N	Percentage	Musical Style
0	0.00%	Liturgical	0	0.00%	Liturgical
8	22.90%	Traditional	1	5.00%	Traditional
0	0.00%	Southern Gospel	0	0.00%	Southern Gospel
0	0.00%	Folk	1	5.00%	Folk
0	0.00%	Urban/Hip Hop	0	0.00%	Urban/Hip Hop
Modern Worship/Praise & Worship			Modern Worship/Praise & Worship		
3	8.60%	& Worship	4	20.00%	Worship
0	0.00%	Global	0	0.00%	Global
19	54.30%	Blended	10	50.00%	Blended
3	8.60%	Other	2	10.00%	Other
2	5.70%	No Answer	2	10.00%	No Answer

One of the most important areas of inquiry for the purposes of this paper dealt with the theological doctrines expressed in the music for congregational worship. The survey provided a list of theological topics and asked the participants to specify which of those doctrines were expressed in the music of corporate worship over the past month. The most surprising insight gleaned from this line of questioning was the breadth of theology sung in worship by members of both groups. "The Attributes of God," "The Divinity of Christ," and "Salvation" were the most frequently sung theological topics in both groups, but the distinctions between the two groups came into focus upon further examination. "The Sovereignty of God," "Sin," and "Sanctification" were selected by

over 70 percent of the members of Group A. Each of these three statements corresponds directly to one of the five traditional points of Calvinism or the Doctrines of Grace. Group B designated “The Word of God,” “The Work of the Holy Spirit,” and “Evangelism” more frequently than the members of Group A. These statements correspond more closely with traditional non-Calvinist theology. Table 3 provides the complete responses to the question of theology in music for corporate worship.

Table 3: Theology in the Music of Corporate Worship

Group A			Group B		
N	Percentage	Theological Concept	N	Percentage	Theological Concept
29	82.90%	The Word of God	17	85.00%	The Word of God
		The Attributes of			The Attributes of
31	88.60%	God	18	90.00%	God
18	51.40%	Creation	13	65.00%	Creation
		The Divinity of			The Divinity of
31	88.60%	Christ	16	80.00%	Christ
		The Humanity of			The Humanity of
21	50.00%	Christ	7	35.00%	Christ
		The Work of the			The Work of the
22	62.90%	Holy Spirit	16	80.00%	Holy Spirit
28	80.00%	Sin	12	60.00%	Sin
		Confession and			Confession and
27	77.10%	Repentance	14	70.00%	Repentance
		The Sovereignty			The Sovereignty
31	88.60%	of God	13	65.00%	of God
30	85.70%	Salvation	18	90.00%	Salvation
25	71.40%	Sanctification	9	45.00%	Sanctification
		The Return of			The Return of
20	57.10%	Christ	12	60.00%	Christ
19	54.30%	Eternal Life	12	60.00%	Eternal Life
21	60.00%	The Church	10	50.00%	The Church
7	20.00%	Baptism	3	15.00%	Baptism
		The Lord's			The Lord's
13	37.10%	Supper	5	25.00%	Supper
21	60.00%	Evangelism	13	65.00%	Evangelism

Another area of inquiry with direct implications from Calvinist theology dealt with the role of psalmody in worship. Not unexpectedly the churches in Group A were more likely (54 percent) to use musical settings of the psalms in worship than those in Group B (35 percent). This practice, however, is not widespread, as the majority of both groups indicated infrequent use of the psalms in worship (48 percent and 43 percent respectively).

Another significant area of investigation in this survey concerned the motivation for the selection of music for worship. The participants were to place in order of importance a series of questions with regards to the selection of music for worship. These possible choices included such questions as “Does the music teach biblical doctrine,” “Does the music connect thematically with the sermon,” and “Does the musical enable personal expression?”

Several observations can be made upon examination of the responses. The teaching of biblical doctrine was selected as the most important factor in selecting music by the majority of the responses in both groups. Group A, however, seemed to favor that priority as a whole with 86 percent placing “biblical doctrine” in their first two priorities as opposed to 45 percent in Group B. 60 percent of the responses in Group B placed “connection thematically with the sermon” in the first three levels of priority as opposed to only 40 percent in Group A. Group B also favored the emotional connection in music than Group A, as indicated by 60 percent of the responses in the first four priorities contrasting with only 14 percent. The vast majority of responses in both groups placed the “appeal to non-believers” as the lowest priority in the selection of music.

The final area of study to be highlighted concerns the musical resources and actual songs used in worship. The participants were provided a listed of commonly used musical resources (hymnals, supplements, web resources, etc.) and were instructed to indicate which of them they used in selecting music for worship. They were also given the opportunity to provide the names of other resources that were not listed in the survey. One remarkable note from their answers concerned the rapid adoption of the new 2008 Baptist Hymnal. 29% of Group A and 45% of Group B indicated the use of the new Baptist Hymnal in worship. This is a rather swift rate of acceptance for a worship resource that has only been available for a relatively short amount of time. The Calvinist churches showed a preference for the use of music by PDI and, as it later came to be known, Sovereign Grace Music, with 60% of the churches indicating usage. Group B seemed to favor more popular worship resources including music from Integrity, Hosanna, and Word publishers. Group A demonstrated a far greater variety of additional resources including online sources, several non-Baptist hymnals and psalters, and other collections targeted for churches with Calvinistic tendencies.

Lastly, the survey asked the participants to list the five most commonly used songs for worship in their churches. The complete listing of their responses to this question can be found in Appendix 4. Ninety unique songs were listed; including sixteen of the twenty-five listed songs in the August 2009 CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International) copyright report.¹⁴ 40 percent of those surveyed in Group A listed *In*

¹⁴ *CCLI Top 25 Songs*, <http://www.ccli.com/LicenseHolder/Top25Lists.aspx> (accessed September 18, 2009).

Christ Alone by Keith Getty as one of their most used songs for worship, as well as 20 percent of those in Group B, making it the most commonly shared song for worship in both groups. Group A demonstrated a preference for hymns or worship songs with a greater amount of stanzas and texts, including such highly ranked songs as *Before the Throne of God Above*, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, *And Can It Be?*, and *How Firm a Foundation*. Churches in Group B showed a preference for worship songs written in the past twenty-five years as opposed to familiar hymnody. Of the twelve most frequently listed songs for worship by Group B, only 3 (20 percent) of them could be considered traditional hymnody. This is sharply contrasted with eight of twelve (67 percent) listed by the churches in Group A.

Conclusions

The results of the survey provide several interesting points of discussion with regards to the effect of Calvinism upon Southern Baptist churches. Upon examination, it appears that churches prescribing to Calvinist theology place a greater emphasis upon the reading of Scripture in worship, the teaching of theological doctrine in their music, and the role of the Senior Pastor in guiding the worship of the church. These churches appear to be effectively communicating their doctrinal distinctions to their members during the corporate worship service. This in turn appears to lead to a greater majority of their churches enthusiastically participating in corporate worship, while remaining intellectually engaged in the process.

Churches in Group B demonstrate a greater likelihood of adopting newer models of musical literature, style, and practice. There is also an increased emphasis

upon the emotional connection of the congregation in worship. These results are to be expected with a theology and a tradition that emphasizes the priority of evangelism in the corporate worship service.

Obviously it is impossible to draw dogmatic conclusions from the results of the survey. They call for a greater depth of research into the current worship practices of Southern Baptist churches. Church musicians have a great responsibility to effectively shape the worship of their churches, while maintaining and propagating the theological distinctions of their congregation, be that Calvinist or not. It is the hope of the author that this paper will prompt further examination and encourage other Christian music scholars to make their contribution to the growing dialogue concerning Calvinism and the future of the Southern Baptist Convention.

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