

Election could prove troubling to Calvinists in SBC

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By Ken Camp

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When Southern Baptist Convention messengers elected dark-horse candidate Frank Page of South Carolina as president, they not only sent a populist message to the powerbrokers who backed other candidates, but also—at least in the eyes of some observers—may have dealt a blow to resurgent Calvinism in SBC ranks.

Page, pastor of First Baptist Church in Taylors, S.C., wrote a book published six years ago critiquing five-point Calvinism—belief in total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints.

“It is most grievous to see a large number of individuals accept without question the doctrine of John Calvin in regards to salvation,” Page writes in *Trouble with the Tulip: A Closer Examination of the Five Points of Calvinism*. “This acceptance of his manmade system of logic has led many to say things about God which are simply unbelievable!”

Calvinism distorts the biblical picture of God as a loving Father who wants

to see all people brought into relationship with him, he asserts.

“The true nature of God is not shown by a Calvinistic theology that presents a God who selects one to be saved and another to be lost,” Page writes.

Page calls for “a scripturally based understanding of salvation” rather than reliance on “manmade doctrines” such as Calvin’s systematic theology.

“Rather than accepting a belief system which is based upon a reformer’s beliefs or teachings, I propose that we adopt God’s teaching on salvation,” Page writes.

Page affirms the eternal security of believers—“perseverance of the saints” in Calvinist terms—and presents election as a biblical concept but refuses to categorize it as “unconditional.”

Furthermore, he argues grace can be resisted by a rebellious human free will and insists Christ’s atonement is unlimited.

Calvinism—at least when pressed to its logical conclusion—undercuts evangelism, he concludes.

“If one follows the logic of Calvinism, then a missionary or evangelistic spirit is unnecessary,” he writes. “If irresistible grace is truth, then there is no need to share Christ with anyone, since those persons whom God has elected are irresistibly going to be drawn into his kingdom anyway.”

Ironically, at many points, Page’s criticism of Calvinism align with positions presented by Paige Patterson during a Southern Baptist Pastors’ Conference breakout session “dialogue” on the subject. Patterson—an architect of the fundamentalist movement in the SBC—publicly endorsed Arkansas pastor Ronnie Floyd in the contested SBC presidential race.

“I do not find in Scripture any case for irresistible grace,” said Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, who

also argued against limited atonement. During the breakout session, Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., spoke in favor of five-point Calvinism.

Page's call for a doctrine of salvation based solely on the Bible rather than a human system of logic also was echoed by former SBC President Ed Young of Houston at the Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference.

"Our theology is biblical, it is not systematic. Therefore we as Baptists, we are not Calvinist; we are not Arminian; we are Baptists," Young said. "That's who we are, and we always come down somewhere in the middle."

At his presidential news conference during the SBC annual meeting, Page seemed to express willingness to work with Southern Baptist Calvinists. When asked if he'd be willing to appoint someone to a denominational board who is an inerrantist but might otherwise differ theologically, Page said he'd have to decide such situations on a "case-by-case" basis.

Page noted that while he has spoken against what he called "hyper-Calvinism," he "works wonderfully" with Calvinists and charismatics in his church.

Two leaders of Founders Ministries—a Baptist group devoted to promoting the "doctrines of grace" as expressed in Calvinism—expressed high regard for Page as a likeable person, but—predictably—took strong exception to his theological position.

Tom Nettles, professor of historical theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., praised Page as a "reasonable man" who showed "courage in a willingness to run in opposition to a candidate widely endorsed by convention leaders." But he insisted Page's book was based on "a flawed historiography and inadequate exegesis."

Prior to the convention, Founders Ministries Executive Director Tom Ascol

posted a review of Page's book on his Internet blog. Ascol praised the "gracious" tone of Page's book, but he questioned his expressed commitment to work with—and appoint to SBC committees—committed Calvinists. Kindness and civility are commendable, but theological convictions cannot be ignored, he insisted.

"Is Page saying that he is willing to work with people who follow 'manmade doctrines,' whose religion is 'without biblical support,' whose theological convictions mean 'there is no need to share Christ with anyone' and encourage 'a slackening of the aggressive evangelistic and missionary heartbeat of the church?'" Ascol asked in his blog entry.

"I would not work with such people, and I would not want a president of the SBC who would either. ... If Dr. Page genuinely believes what he has written about Calvinism, then no amount of kindness can justify his willingness to work with the kinds of people described in his book!"

After he met Page at the SBC annual meeting, Ascol said, "He strikes me as a humble, godly man," whom he liked.

"I don't think his election will have any sort of profound impact on the resurgence of reformed theology in the SBC. I would say that no matter who became president," he concluded. "The kind of reformation that we need in the SBC cannot be attained by presidential elections or denominational politics."

Nettles agreed, saying: "His election will make no difference in the resurgence of Baptist confessional Calvinism negatively. This resurgence has had little if any encouragement from denominational officers for 25 years, and continued opposition will make little if any difference. He could help by broadening participation as he has promised and give some notable leaders of the Calvinist resurgence responsible tasks through his appointive prerogatives."

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