

Baby Boomer Baptist theologians tilt toward Calvinism

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By Ken Camp

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BROWNWOOD—Among Baptist Baby Boomer theologians, at least half of the major authors are committed to Calvinism, an influential Baptist theologian of an earlier generation has noted.

James Leo Garrett Jr., emeritus distinguished professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, examined 10 Baptist theologians of the Baby Boomer generation during a plenary address at Howard Payne University's Christian doctrines colloquy in Brownwood.

Jonathan Edwards

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Garrett identified three as “pronounced Calvinists”—John Piper, Thomas J. Nettles and Timothy George. He listed two—Donald A. Carson and Wayne Grudem—as “moderate Calvinists” and one—David Dockery—as “Calminian,” an amalgam of Calvinist and Arminian theology.

Of the remaining theologians Garrett examined, he said three did not position themselves about Calvinism in their writing—Paul Fiddes, Stanley Grenz and Nigel G. Wright. One, Roger Olson, he identified as “the principal Baptist advocate of Arminianism.”

In his presentation at Howard Payne—a condensed version of a chapter

from an upcoming book—he dealt most thoroughly with Piper and Nettles.

Jonathan Edwards—the 18th century pastor-theologian perhaps best known for his “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” hellfire sermon—profoundly shaped Piper’s theology—particularly regarding the doctrine of God, Garrett noted.

“There is a sense in which Piper’s theology consists of only one doctrine—the doctrine of God,” he said. “It’s the supremacy and the glory of God, even more than his sovereignty, that is central to Piper’s theology.”

Garrett noted with interest the controversy that arose in 2005 when Piper advocated that his congregation, Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minn., adopt a policy of open baptism—granting membership to Christians who gave evidence of conversion but who were sprinkled as infants.

“John Piper, who has expanding and far-reaching influence as a pastor-theologian in the God-glorifying school of Edwards, has increasingly demonstrated that he is first evangelical and Reformed and second Baptist,” Garrett said.

Nettles—professor of historical theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.—simultaneously advanced the causes of inerrancy and Calvinism in Southern Baptist ranks, beginning in the early 1980s, Garrett noted.

“Nettles laid the blame for the demise of Dortian Calvinism among Southern Baptists on E.Y. Mullins for his theological methodology in which experience overshadowed the Scriptures and on L.R. Scarborough for his evangelistic methodology centering on what Nettles called ‘decisional regeneration,’” Garrett said.

Mullins was president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Scarborough was president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary,

both in the early 20th century.

“Nettles seems to embrace the domino theory,” Garrett observed. “That is, if the doctrines of Dortian Calvinism should be rejected and not be allowed to be the fountainhead of all theology, then theological crises, nonevangelical positions and process theology would be the result.”

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