

# EDITORIAL: Church discipline deserves emphasis

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Thank the Calvinists for one of the most thoughtfully provocative moments of the 2008 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting.

(Of course, if you're a Calvinist, you'll say: "No, thank God. That moment was preordained from before the foundation of the world." Just a little theological humor.)

The moment happened while messengers considered the sixth of [nine resolutions they passed](#) this year. Resolution Six addressed "regenerate church membership and church member restoration." It exhorted churches and pastors to "implement a plan to minister to, counsel and restore wayward church members based upon the commands and principles given in Scripture."

Editor Marv Knox

But Tom Ascol, pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Fla., and a key leader among Calvinist—also called Reformed—Southern Baptists, suggested the resolution needed to be more direct and substantial.

Ascol asked messengers to amend the original resolution and to call on Southern Baptist churches "to repent of any failure among us to live up to our professed commitment to regenerate church membership and any failure to obey Jesus Christ in lovingly correcting wayward church members." His amendment also urged denominational leaders "to support and encourage any church's efforts to recover and implement this discipline of our Lord Jesus Christ ... even if such efforts result in a reduction in the number of members that are recorded in those churches."

Calvinism, or Reformed theology, takes its name from the 16th century reformer John Calvin. Its five “points” are brought to mind by the acrostic TULIP—representing total depravity of all humans, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints (or what Baptists often call “once saved, always saved”).

From its earliest decades, the Baptist movement has embraced both Calvinists and non-Calvinists. Because contemporary Baptists focus so strongly on missions and Christ’s Great Commission to proclaim the gospel to “all nations,” most of them shy away from strict Calvinism. They can’t comprehend that God would “elect” or choose some people for salvation while also condemning others to hell even before they are born. As you might imagine, Baptists have argued over Calvinism for generations.

But Calvinism has been gaining favor with many Baptists, particularly young adults, for several years. Its most attractive feature is its unswerving belief in the sovereignty, or absolute power, of God. In such uncertain times, it’s not surprising that an emphasis on God’s timeless and ultimate power has found a following.

It’s also not surprising Calvinists would lead an emphasis on “regenerate church membership”—ensuring that church members have a vital, saving, personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. They would state it more precisely, but in essence they point to two facts: (a) if God is sovereign and Christ died for the church, then the church should take God’s power and Christ’s sacrifice seriously as it relates to its membership, and (b) if a person claims to have a saving relationship with God through the mediation of Christ, then he or she should live like it.

A potential danger of Ascol’s proposal is that Baptist Christians could tilt too much toward judgmentalism and fail to apply God’s grace. But given the fact Baptists can’t even find about half the members we count, and many of the ones we can find don’t live as if Christ has made a difference in

their lives, judgment is a far lesser danger than the laxity of license.

If we love people whose names fill our church rolls but who never darken our church doors and who live like hell, we will draw up the courage to “lovingly correct” them. That’s difficult and uncomfortable. But the consequences are eternal.