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REFORMED THEOLOGY RESURGENCE

New Calvinists and the Future of Evangelicalism

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Many young evangelicals today are embracing Reformed theology, to the extent that Time magazine has ranked it number three on its list of ten ideas that are changing the world. Igniting the new passion for Calvinism are notable Christian leaders such as John Piper, Mark Driscoll, and Albert Mohler. Signs of this Reformed revival include the first printings of the Calvinist-flavored ESV Study Bible—completely sold out—and the increased popularity of Calvinist blogs such as “Between Two Worlds.”¹

The following will offer a general definition of terms and reasons behind the resurgence of Calvinism among today’s Christian youth.

CALVIN, CALVINISM, AND REFORMED THEOLOGY

Reformed theology emphasizes the teachings of John Calvin (1509–1564) and Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531).² Calvin’s own theological viewpoints are expressed in the Institutes of the Christian Religion. Doctrinal creeds such as the Heidelberg Confession, the Belgic Confession, and the Westminster Confession represent the major tenets of Reformed theology.³ The Reformed tradition has also given Christianity many great teachers, preachers, and theologians such as Louis Berkhoff, Jonathan Edwards, Abraham Kuyper, John Owen, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, and George Whitefield.

An extremely controversial aspect of Reformed theology is its understanding of divine election. Drawing on various passages (e.g., [John 6:35–40](#), [44](#), [65](#); [Rom. 8:28–30](#); [9:6–24](#); [Eph. 1:3–6](#)), they believe “God in eternity past chose a number of fallen creatures to be reconciled to himself. In time Christ came to save the chosen. The Holy Spirit enlightens the elect ones so that they can believe the Gospel and receive salvation. The elect can never resist the work of the Spirit nor fall away after receiving salvation. Salvation can be summarized by the Five Points of Calvinism: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints (TULIP).”⁴

It is necessary to note, moreover, that the Five Points of Calvinism are understood by many to be an interrelated, harmonious, self-contained system; thus, rejecting one point is tantamount to rejecting every point, and the falsity of one point falsifies the whole system.⁵ There are, however, Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike who believe one can still maintain a logically coherent theology while affirming some of the points but rejecting others. Seventeenth century French theologian Moise Amyraut, for example, postulated the atonement was “sufficient for all, but because of universal human depravity, in practice it was efficient only for the elect.”⁶ Norman Geisler identifies himself as a moderate Calvinist and contends for a nuanced understanding of each point.⁷ The debate is complex, centering upon questions related to exegesis (what does a specific passage teach?), theology (what do the Scriptures on the whole teach on the

topic of divine sovereignty and human freedom?), and philosophy (does an internally coherent theological system— Calvinist, Arminian, or a mediating position— correspond to ultimate truth? How can this be known?), and volumes can be written on each of these questions.

Reformed theology in general as well as its particular view of divine election and salvation are within the pale of biblical orthodoxy.

YOUNG, RESTLESS, AND REFORMED

Colin Hansen, an associate editor for *Christianity Today*, perceived a return to Reformed theology among his circle of college friends. They read John Piper's *Desiring God*, sent emails on sales for the five-volume set of Charles Spurgeon's sermons, and declared intentions of studying at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS). This observation inspired a near two-year investigation to confirm whether or not the resurgence of Calvinism extended beyond his Campus Crusade for Christ group at Northwestern State University.⁸

Young evangelicals, according to Hansen's research, are embracing Calvinism because of Reformed theology's emphasis on doctrine. Consider the case of Joshua Harris, author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. He admits his initial experience with Calvinists was negative, since those contending for the doctrine of grace had "a total lack of grace"; however, he had a change of heart after reading books by John Piper and being mentored by charismatic Calvinist C. J. Mahaney. The theological depth of Calvinist preachers, teachers, and theologians attracted Harris, which was something new to him, since the seeker-sensitive and charismatic churches he attended downplayed doctrine.⁹

The trend in many modern evangelical churches of downplaying doctrine has left young attendees starving for theological substance. Timothy George notes, "We've so dumbed down the gospel and dumbed down worship in a good effort to reach as many people as we can that there's almost a backlash. It comes from this great hunger for a genuinely God-centered, transcendence-focused understanding of who God is and what God wants us to do and what God has given us in Jesus Christ."¹⁰

SPREADING CALVINISM WITH PASSION

Many students are discovering Calvinism through John Piper's speaking engagements at the Passion conferences. More than just a youth event with music from Christian musicians such as Matt Redman, Charlie Hall, David Crowder, and Chris Tomlin, Passion has a mission to "glorify God, uniting students in worship and prayer for spiritual awakening in this generation."¹¹ Passion's mission compliments Piper's *Christian Hedonism*, an idea he developed in *Desiring God* to capture the essence of the Westminster Shorter Catechism's first affirmation: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." For Piper, this means "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."¹² Piper and Passion have gone hand-in-hand for eleven conference events, and Passion founder Louie Giglio admires Piper for "saying the gospel without any sort of sugar-coating."¹³

Many youth also connect to Calvinism via Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. Identifying himself as one of the Emerging Reformers on a four-lane emergent highway, Driscoll understands the postmodern mindset of his flock and preaches an authentic Christian message in a way that reaches many with the gospel. He is charismatic in gifts and worship, aggressive in church planting, and committed to the Reformed theological tradition.¹⁴

Albert Mohler is an accomplished writer, radio talk-show host, and president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS). In 1993 he took a stand for truth and reaffirmed the school's confession of faith, which resulted in the loss of ninety six percent of the liberal faculty. His conservative stand allowed

the school to attract a strong faculty and increase enrollment. Under Mohler's leadership SBTS has taken on a Calvinistic flavor and presently turns out a steady flow of Reformed pastors.¹⁵ When critics charged him with forcing a Calvinist theological agenda on SBTS, he responded: "All Southern Baptists are Calvinists of one sort or another" and that Baptist doctrinal statements like the *Abstract of Principles* and the *Baptist Faith and Message* reflect that Calvinist influence.¹⁶

OLD NEW CALVINISM

New Calvinists maintain the core beliefs of Reformed theology; however, there are subtle differences. Driscoll makes the following comparisons:

- Old Calvinism was fundamental or liberal and separated from or syncretized with culture. New Calvinism is missional and seeks to create and redeem culture.
- Old Calvinism fled from the cities. New Calvinism is flooding into the cities.
- Old Calvinism was cessationistic and fearful of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. New Calvinism is continuationist and joyful in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.
- Old Calvinism was fearful and suspicious of other Christians and burned bridges. New Calvinism loves all Christians and builds bridges between them.¹⁷

Driscoll recognizes the existence of a small but loud bunch of "Cruel Calvinists," and he admonishes "Christians in general, and Reformed Christians in particular," to demonstrate "the kind of love and humility that our theology requires." "Cruel, flame-thrown half-truths and misquotes between Christians," he says, "do not speak well to the watching world of the love we are supposed to share."¹⁸

Driscoll also admits that the New and Old Calvinist dichotomy is not entirely accurate, for the New Calvinists are only attempting to "speak the same truths in fresh and passionate ways," which is something Calvinists of all generations had done, and the many great theologians of the past can be considered "Old New Calvinists."¹⁹

CONCERNS ABOUT CALVINISM

The resurgence of Calvinism does not please everyone. Many Christians voice strong criticisms against the Five Points of Calvinism. Moreover, David Van Biema, author of the Time article, depicts the God of Reformed theology as "an utterly sovereign and micromanaging deity."²⁰ Steve Lemke, provost of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, claims that the Southern Baptist Church baptism and membership figures show Calvinist churches lack commitment to evangelism.²¹

Thomas McCall, professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, cheers Calvinists for caring about theology and holiness. However, he encourages them to read outside their tradition, such as patristic theology and medieval scholasticism, and warns of their unhealthy reliance on what he calls a "Neo-Reformed Magisterium," that is, "the small group of theologians and conference speakers...quoted as the final word on any theological topic."²² McCall also observes Calvinists' displays of divisiveness and theological arrogance are not few but "legion," but admits even non-Calvinists are not above reproach.²³

Many Calvinists, however, point to the message and ministry of Piper, Driscoll, and Mohler as contrary evidence to these critics. They preach a God of sovereign grace, encourage evangelism, study opposing issues, and disapprove of character flaws such as divisiveness and arrogance.

Still, the question remains whether or not Reformed theology best represents the truths revealed in Scripture. Could not students also find a rich pious worship anchored by deep theological roots in the Lutheran and Wesleyan traditions? This is ultimately an issue over which Christians can debate but should not divide.

Doctrine matters! In a topsy-turvy world dominated by postmodernism, Christians cannot afford to skirt complex doctrinal issues but must strive to know what they believe and why they believe it. Many young evangelicals thirsting for theological substance are quenching their thirst by drinking from the deep cistern of Reformed theology. Only time will tell whether and to what extent this resurgence of Calvinism among youth will serve as a corrective to the theological indifference and cultural conformity that have blighted evangelicalism in recent years.

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notes

- 1 David Van Biema, *Time*, "10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now," http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1884779_1884782_1884760,00.html.
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- 3 For a full list of Reformed creeds see Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).
- 4 H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 6. Cf. James White and George Bryson, "The Divine Sovereignty-Human Responsibility Debate (Part One)," *Christian Research Journal* 23, 4 (2001): 32–40 (<http://www.equip.org/articles/the-divine-sovereignty-human-responsibility-debate>); James White and George Bryson, "The Divine Sovereignty-Human Responsibility Debate (Part Two)," *Christian Research Journal* 24, 1 (2002): 22–25, 41–47 (<http://www.equip.org/articles/the-divine-sovereignty-human-responsibility-debate-continued>).
- 5 Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932), 59.
- 6 Bruce Demarest, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 54.
- 7 Norman Geisler, *Chosen but Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1999). For a Calvinist critique cf. James White, *The Potter's Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2000).
- 8 Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 11–12. Cf. also Collin Hansen, "Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism Is Making a Comeback—and Shaking up the Church," *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/september/42.32.html>.
- 9 Hansen, "Young, Restless, Reformed," *Christianity Today*.
- 10 Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed*, 21.
- 11 268 Generation, "About/History," <http://www.268generation.com/2.0/splash2.htm>.
- 12 John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 288.
- 13 Collin Hansen, "Passion Takes It Higher," *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/april/20.29.html>.
- 14 Mark Driscoll, "Navigating the Emergent Church Highway," *Christian Research Journal* 31, 4 (2008): 14.
- 15 Hansen, "Young, Restless, and Reformed," *Christianity Today*.

16 Baptist 2 Baptist, "Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's Responses to the Baptist General Convention of Texas Seminary Study Committee Report," <http://www.baptist2baptist.net/b2barticle.asp?ID=41>.

17 Mark Driscoll, "Time Magazine Names New Calvinism 3rd Most Powerful Idea," http://theresurgence.com/new_calvinism.

18 Mark Driscoll, "More Thoughts on Time Magazine and New Calvinism," http://theresurgenc.com/time_magazine_new_reformed.

19 Mark Driscoll, "Long Live the Dead Guys Week," http://theresurgence.com/dead_guys_week.

20 Van Biema.

21 Hansen, "Young Restless Reformed," *Christianity Today*.

22 Thomas McCall, "Two Cheers for the Resurgence of Calvinism in Evangelicalism: A Wesleyan-Arminian Perspective," <http://theologica.blogspot.com/2008/04/two-cheers-forresurgence-of-calvinism.html>.

23 Ibid.