

A RESPONSE TO STEVE W. LEMKE'S "WHAT IS A BAPTIST?: NINE MARKS THAT SEPARATE BAPTISTS FROM PRESBYTERIANS"

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Before I get into my response, let me tell you about my personal pilgrimage with Calvinism. I first encountered it 25 years ago when I was a sophomore in College. One of my friends believed in Calvinism, and he did well in formulating his view. While articulate, he was not able to persuade. He, however, remained a good friend.

Although I lived in Scotland for two years (near John Knox's home), I did not again encounter Calvinism until I was in seminary. One friend spoke to me about the "Doctrines of Grace," and he asked me what I thought of them. I said, "I'm somewhere between a 2- and 3-point Calvinist: the 'T,' the 'P,' and perhaps the 'L.'" Immediately he fired back, "No! You can't be 2- or 3-point; it's all or nothing!" Without hesitation, I simply told him, "Well, that's where I am; call it what you want." Basically, I've not changed my position. I hold the same basic understanding that Dr. Lemke has noted in his paper, and I believe most Southern Baptists hold the same view.

You may wonder what, if anything, I can offer to this discussion. After all, I'm a professor of Old Testament at a small Baptist school in Northeast Arkansas, one of the last bastions of Landmarkism within Southern Baptist life. We're still tackling issues of "closed communion" and "alien immersion" in our churches, so how does Calvinism affect us at Williams?

For the most part, Calvinism affects our students with mild interest, since most of them have never encountered it before they arrived to campus. Some of our students will go to "Passion" during Christmas break (and hear John Piper speak), while others at times attend the Reformed Baptist church in our area. In my years at Williams, I have seen the discussion rise and fall: for a while it will be popular, then it will subside. While presently most of the Calvinism discussion on campus has subsided, I'm sure it will appear again. New followers simply appreciate its concise formulaic answers, and many like its structured view of theology. Opponents of Calvinism, however, have two basic concerns to the system: the origin of sin, and the all-encompassing nature of God's love.

First, if one takes Calvinism to its full conclusion, the question has to be raised: how did sin begin in the world? If Adam and Eve were sinless and had no sinful nature, what made them sin? Though not all believe this, many Calvinists feel that God made them sin. Personally, I find such a view repulsive and heretical. Not only does it create more answers than it solves, the Bible states that God does not cause people to sin (cf. James 1:13).

Second, the Bible speaks of God's all-encompassing love for everyone. One of my most vocal Reformed students would discuss with me of his view of limited atonement, and he'd quote to me Romans 9-11 and Ephesians 2 (two citations that Calvinists often quote).

I, in turn, would defend my view of God's love, quoting 1 John, 1 Timothy 2, and John 3:16.¹

One day this same student met my mother, who visited us for a few days. He learned that my mom was raised Presbyterian; and this fascinated him. He asked her, "I'm surprised that you grew up Presbyterian, but you're now a Baptist. Why did you change?" Without hesitation, she replied, "In the Baptist church I encountered something I never did in the Presbyterian church: I learned that God loved me." She had heard many sermons on social reform and neo-orthodoxy, but she had never heard one about God's love. When she learned of God's love, she accepted Christ. My mom may not have attended seminary or college, but she understands salvation! Her testimony changed my student, and he has since toned down some of his Calvinistic beliefs.

Although the above two concerns are the most noted, there are a few more I wish to mention. First, Calvinism is a system of belief, one of many systematic theologies. It does not answer every theological question, nor can it. It is a good, rational way of understanding theology, but it is not divine. There are other possibilities.

Second, the Reform movement is more than just theology. The idea of reforming our country is at the center of Calvinism. While there is some good in this, may I remind you that, if you want to see the Reform movement in action, look at Switzerland. It is one of the most efficient, precise, and wealthy nations on earth—and one of the most post-Christian.

Third, I think Baptists—even those who are "5-point"—prefer the "cafeteria" plan of Calvinism. Some Reform pastors want elders, but not synods! Without the proper checks and balances, an elder system creates an autonomous pastor. Several have merged what they like about the Reform movement with Baptist church polity.

Fourth, while I follow the basic idea of the "age of accountability," it is very difficult to find suitable biblical citations regarding this tenet. Even Baptist theologians like W. T. Conner could not use the Bible to prove his case; he simply could not conceive of a God who would send a child (or "child-like" person) to hell. While Baptists cannot find scriptural support for pedobaptism, the same could be said of the "age of accountability."

When I talk about Calvinism in class, I do not take sides, much to my students' dismay. When we talk about God's plan, I talk more about the philosophical beliefs of determinism, libertarianism, and compatibilism, then I "theologize" them. I'm sure my systematic friends would cringe! Though I rarely say it in class, most of my students learn that I am a centrist in the Calvin-Arminian debate, and that I'm more of a "biblical" theologian than a "systematic" theologian. I honestly don't mind the tension. Maybe none of us should.

¹One of my colleagues was once asked, "what does 'the world' mean in John 3:16? He replied, "Um, I think it means, "*the world!*"