

October 6, 2008

To: Dr. Johnny Hunt
CC: Dr. Jerry Vines

Drs. Hunt and Vines,

I write to you today with not the slightest bit of unease in my heart. I know that both of you are busy gentlemen, pursuing a great call from our Lord Jesus, but I pray that our equality in Christ can buy me but a short audience today. In order to frame my reason for writing you I will give a short introduction. I am a 23-year old college instructor living in Gainesville, FL. I first accepted God's gift of salvation when I was nine years old, and since 2001 I have been a member in a Southern Baptist church. Over the past year the Lord has dealt greatly with me and this past May I felt his call on my life to become a vocational pastor. Currently I am making preparations to go into seminary at a Southern Baptist seminary, though I have not decided which one. I am also a convicted 5-point Calvinist. Because of these two commitments, a commitment to the integrity of God's work in the Southern Baptist Convention and a commitment to the Calvinist views God has revealed in my heart, I am racked with frustration. This frustration stems from the fact that I see an increasing animosity towards reformed views of Scripture inside the SBC, and it specifically concerns you gentlemen because I am seeing it propagated by the presidency of the convention and under the moniker of Jerry Vines Ministries. This propagation I refer to is in regards to past comments I have heard in sermons and lectures and particularly in light of the upcoming John 3:16 conference. Typically I would be able to let reactions such as this pass, but this time it has been laid heavy on my heart that the continuance of these messages and this conference is both misrepresentative of Baptist Calvinists and destructive to the greater body of the SBC.

To begin with, in speaking of misrepresentation, I want to make every effort to be charitable and respectful in what I say, while still maintaining the thrust of the emotions that I feel in this matter. I want to apologize in advance for any overgeneralizations or misrepresentations that I may accidentally make. That said, I believe that the way in which you gentlemen, the ministries bearing your names, and the pastors who are associating with it are representing the doctrines of Calvinism is untrue to the actual beliefs of those who hold to them. In my opinion, the beliefs you oppose are more rightly termed Hyper-Calvinism, yet, looking at the leaders of the current move towards reformed theology, such as Dr. Al Mohler, Dr. John Piper, Dr. John MacArthur, Dr. R.C. Sproul, Dr. Mark Dever, Pastor Tim Keller, and Pastor Mark Driscoll, to the best of my knowledge none of them could be termed Hyper-Calvinist in the least. When one says that "If a Calvinist is a soul winner it is in spite of Calvinism, not because of it" (as I quote from one of Dr. Vines' messages in October 2006 at First Baptist Church of Woodstock, GA) then they have to be turning a blind-eye

to the incredible soul winning ministries which are being led by these men and their compatriots without ever once compromising on the Calvinistic principles they hold. Instead, what this statement does say is that, if one is a consistent Calvinist then de facto they must be a determinist and so not interested in evangelism or discipleship. This could not be further from the truth. If nothing else, a consistent Calvinist is interested in those things because they have a high view of Scripture and, as R.C Sproul points out in his book *Chosen by God*, "Christ does command us to do evangelism." (Of course, I do not believe many consistent Calvinists would accept the charge of determinism either).

Another thing I find somewhat deceitful is the title and format of the upcoming conference, *The John 3:16 Conference*. On the surface, when I first heard this name, I expected to see a conference on the need for global evangelism, which I guess in some perverted sense it is, but more directly it appears to be a "Why Calvinism is Untenable" conference. Placing such a conference under the heading of John 3:16 seems to imply a natural conflict between John 3:16 and Calvinism. However, it amazes me that this misconception still exists, since in my opinion the conflict was rightly debunked at least 350 years ago by John Owen in his book *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. Since then, in order to make this same mistake, one would have to be reverting to the aforementioned fallacy of equating Calvinism with Hyper-Calvinism, which I hope we won't do.

As well, to set each point of TULIP up to be attacked unopposed by a non-Calvinist shows little conviction that a rebuttal argument would be defeated. On top of that, the withholding of recorded media from the conference brings forth questions about integrity among the speakers. As prominent pastors there should be nothing keeping them from having their words recorded and disseminated to any interested party (a capacity which it is known FBC Woodstock has), and so not to do so, whether intentionally or not, comes across as a desire to avoid accountability for what gets said and makes it impossible for open theological discussion between both realms of conviction. That type of reproachable behavior stands in sharp opposition to the call of Scripture, as I know we are all aware. I think that this conference would be well-served to take a cue from the *Building Bridges* conference held at Southeastern seminary last fall, which offered both sides of each argument and was made available through free of charge recording to anyone who wanted to hear.

My second concern, that this type of behavior is destructive, should be qualified with two pieces of information. One, it is well-documented that there is a serious problem with the increasing age of the Southern Baptist Convention. Dr. Hunt mentioned this specifically when you said in an article addressing the SBC as its president that "I want us to bring the next generation of young leaders into an active participation in our Convention. We have lost much of a generation of pastors, and if we lose the younger generation, we have no future." Two, it is also well-documented that the number of recent seminary graduates serving as pastors who self-identify as 5-point Calvinists is disproportionately more than

the overall number of pastors who self-identify this way (30% to 10%). Since most graduates are young adults this points out what is anecdotally known already, that Calvinism is experiencing resurgence in the youth populations. So, putting this all together, we see that, if the SBC needs to bring in the next generation of young leaders and a good percentage of young leaders are highly Calvinistic, then it would be counterproductive to preach animosity towards Calvinism from the helm of the SBC.

What I think would be more biblical would be taking a step back and realizing that the soteriological differences between people is an in-house debate for well-intentioned, devout Christians, and is not a cause for raising dire concerns from our pulpits and gatherings. By my personal experiences I know this can be done effectively. From 2001 to 2007 I sat under SBC Vice-President Bill Henard at Porter Memorial Baptist Church in Lexington, KY. Though I do not believe Dr. Henard is a 5-point Calvinist, this question was of little concern in his congregation as leaders from all sides of the debate were promoted through the church with no litmus test on their leanings, and 1- to 5-pointers grew to spiritual maturity there. Since leaving Lexington in Fall 2007 I have been a member at North Central Baptist Church in Gainesville, FL, sitting under a man greatly influenced by Dr. Vines, Pastor Calvin Carr. Pastor Carr and I have spoken a few times rather openly about where he and I both stand on the issue, which is not the same place, and yet he has shown little apprehension in trusting me to teach members of all ages in the church. This ease, I feel, is because he understands that my goal, as I believe the goal of most consistent Calvinists, is to make converts and disciples to God, not converts and disciples to Calvinism.

This type of sober biblical handling is the key. Taking the approach that Calvinism is a mistake that needs to be corrected and rooted out of the SBC is a potential death sentence. In fact, the SBC's own research through LifeWay has shown that Calvinistic recent seminary graduates are slightly more evangelistic than their non-Calvinistic counterparts, which is our main goal, right? If we are to be one hundred percent committed to raising up young leaders and growing the church into the future then we need to be understanding that this is a theological difference, when understood correctly as Calvinism and not Hyper-Calvinism, which in no way compromises the fundamental doctrines of the church and which is fully compatible with the Baptist Faith and Message of 2000.

I thank you gentlemen for your time and for your years of service to the Lord in working to reach people for His great name. I pray that my concerns have not been taken as hatred or disrespect, but instead have come across as a heartfelt conviction about the integrity and future of our denomination. In the end I know that our intentions are the same and that the same Lord has spoken into

each of our lives.

Grace and Peace Be With You,
Todd Burus