TRUTH, TRUST, and TESTIMONY in a TIME of TENSION

A Statement from the Calvinism Advisory Committee

Southern Baptists are Great Commission people. We are also a doctrinal people, and those doctrinal convictions Undergird our Great Commission vision and passion. We are a confessional people, who stand together upon the doctrines most vital to us all, confessed together in The Baptist Faith and Message.

Within this common confession, we sometimes disagree over certain theological issues that should not threaten our Great Commission cooperation. We recognize that significant theological disagreement on such issues has occurred with respect to Calvinism. It is, therefore, our responsibility to come together with open hearts and minds in order to speak truthfully, honestly, and respectfully about these theological and doctrinal issues that concern us, threaten to divide us, and compel us into conversation. Such engagement is appropriate at every level of Southern Baptist life including local congregations, associations, state conventions, and the Southern Baptist Convention.

This spirit of conversation has been the hallmark of the meetings of the Calvinism Advisory Committee. We have spent hours together in fruitful, respectful, and candid conversation. We entered these conversations as brothers and sisters in Christ and as faithful and thankful Southern Baptists. Our purpose was neither to resolve centuries of doctrinal disagreement nor to consume ourselves with doctrival debate. Our purpose was to suggest a course for moving forward together while taking seriously and representing fairly the theological diversity that exists in and has been the strength of Southern Baptist life.

Four central issues have become clear to us as we have met together. We affirm together that Southern Baptists must stand without apology upon truth; that we do indeed have some challenging but not insurmountable points of tension; that we must work together with trust; and that we must encourage one another in testimony.

The Bible
We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are the inerrant, infallible, and totally trustworthy Word of God and our supreme authority on all matters of truth. We affirm that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the great theme of all Scripture and that the Bible is sufficient to reveal all we need to know concerning God’s purpose to save sinners.

We deny that any human system of thought or any theological tradition can assume supreme authority or be allowed to supplant dependence upon the Bible and all that it reveals. Neither Calvinism nor non-Calvinism ought to be evaluated exclusively with sound Southern Baptist doctrine nor be considered inconsistent with it.

The Lostness of Humanity
We affirm that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and that the universal condition of humanity is lostness, as every single human being, Jesus alone excepted, is a sinner whose only hope of salvation is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We deny that any human being is without need of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and we deny any teaching that minimizes the truth about sin and the need of all persons to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Power of the Gospel
We affirm that our Lord is mighty to save and that He saves to the uttermost. We affirm the power of the Gospel to redeem every single human being through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom the Father has now declared to be both Lord and Christ, the Savior of the world.

We deny that the Gospel is without power to save anyone who repents and believes in Jesus Christ. We also deny that the Gospel as revealed in Scripture lacks anything needful for our salvation.

The Offer of the Gospel
We affirm that the Gospel is to be made known freely to all in the good faith offer that if anyone confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord and believes in his heart that God has raised Christ from the dead, he will be saved.

We deny that the Gospel lacks any power to save anyone who believes in Christ and receives Him as Savior and Lord. Anyone who understands the Gospel through the power of the Holy Spirit may, in prayer and petition, trust Christ through repentance and faith, and we should plead with all sinners to do so.

The Exclusivity of the Gospel
We affirm that salvation is found in the name of Christ and in no other name. We affirm that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life and that no one can come to the Father but by Him. We affirm the exclusivity of the Gospel of Christ as the only message of salvation.

We deny that salvation can come to any sinner by any other gospel, any other system of faith and practice, or by any name other than Jesus Christ.

The Atonement of Jesus Christ
We affirm that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross was both penal and substitutionary and that the atonement He accomplished was sufficient for the sins of the entire world.

We deny that there is anything lacking in the atonement of Christ to provide for the salvation of anyone.

The Reality of Heaven and Hell
We affirm that all who come to Christ by faith will be with Him forever in heaven, which He has prepared for the saints. We affirm that all who reject Christ and do not come to Him by faith will spend eternity in hell, a place of eternal punishment.

We deny that there is any opportunity for salvation after the point of death, when all humanity will face the judgment of God.

The Necessity of Conversion
We affirm that salvation involves the conversion of the sinner, whereby the sinner consciously clings to Christ by faith, repents of sin, believes the promises of the Gospel, and publicly professes faith in Christ. We affirm the necessity of conversion and the truth that conversion involves the will of the believer as well as the will of God.

We deny that salvation comes to anyone who has not experienced conversion. We also deny that salvation comes to any sinner who does not will to believe and receive Christ.

The Great Commission
We affirm the church’s duty to obey Christ by preaching the Gospel to all the nations and by making disciples who obey all that Christ has commanded. We affirm every believer’s responsibility to tell anyone and everyone about Jesus and the responsibility of every congregation to be a sending, going, and giving assembly of believers.

We deny that missions and evangelism can be neglected without denying the power of the Gospel; that any church can be faithful without a missionary urgency; and that any believer can be obedient without telling others about Jesus. We deny that evangelism can exist apart from the call to make disciples. Every sinner should be implored to trust Christ by calling on Him through repentance and faith, and every convert should be disciplined toward maturity, commitment to the church, and passion for the lost.
TENSIONS

Although we are committed to these central truths, we recognize that within them there are tensions:

• God desires for all to come to repentance, yet not all do.
• Humans are ruined by the Fall, yet required to respond in faith.
• God is sovereign in salvation, yet individuals are still held responsible for their reception or rejection of the Gospel.
• Southern Baptist identity has often been connected to Calvinism, yet has often significantly modified it.

These are just a few of the dynamics at work in Southern Baptist faith and practice. While these tensions can be a source of frustration, especially when we are uncharitable toward those with whom we disagree, they have also been a great benefit to us, reminding us that God’s ways are higher than ours, that no systematic construct can ever contain the fullness of scriptural truth, that it is not only the Bible who are subject to error, that we should approach the Word with both fidelity to the past and readiness for further reformation, and that it is better to live in the tensions of unanswered questions than to ignore or adjust some part of the whole counsel of God.

With a full recognition of the limitless wisdom of God’s Word and the limited wisdom of ourselves, we urge Southern Baptists to grant one another liberty in those areas within the Baptist Faith and Message where differences in interpretation cause us to disagree. For instance,

• We agree that God loves everyone and desires to save everyone, but we disagree as to how
• Some are humble enough to listen, looking to see if this denomination is going to be a bold movement of churches on mission or merely a debating society.

We affirm the responsibility and privilege of every Southern Baptist to advocate his or her doctrinal convictions. We affirm that theology should be honored and privileged in our conversations and cooperation. We also affirm that theological and doctrinal debate can be a sign of great health within a denomination that is devoted to truth and is characterized by trust.

We deny that the main purpose of the Southern Baptist Convention is theological debate. We further deny that theological discussion can be healthy if our primary aim is to win an argument, to triumph in a debate, or to draw every denominational meeting into a conversation over conflicted issues. Of more significance to our life together than any allegiance to Calvinism or non-Calvinism should be our shared identity as Southern Baptists.

Most important, we affirm together that our testimony to the world must be the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—and that Southern Baptists must stand together in the testimony that, however yielding we yet simplify, we have also been a great benefit to us, reminding us that God’s ways are higher than ours, that no systematic construct can ever contain the fullness of scriptural truth, that it is not only the Bible who are subject to error, that we should approach the Word with both fidelity to the past and readiness for further reformation, and that it is better to live in the tensions of unanswered questions than to ignore or adjust some part of the whole counsel of God.

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Calvinism Advisory Group Unanimously Affirms Its EC Advisory Report

For several years, Southern Baptists have been asking important questions about our identity and our future. At times we have struggled with trying to grasp the breadth of our doctrinal and historical differences, particularly related to matters such as Calvinism. What has been needed is a new consensus that will help point us toward a new sense of cooperation and renewal for the sake of the Gospel.

It is our hope that Truth, Trust, and Testimony in a Time of Tension, while not a perfect statement, will, nevertheless, provide a significant and positive step in that direction. The statement reflects the efforts of many diverse voices who have attempted to speak as one with a sense of convivial civility and Spirit-enabled charity toward and with one another. We pray that these efforts will enable us to serve collaboratively and work faithfully, while offering a joyful and Gospel-focused witness to a lost and needy world.

David S. Dockery, Chairman
president, Union University, Jackson, Tennessee

I am excited and honored to present Southern Baptists with a consensus statement driven by the things we hold so dear: the Word, the Spirit, mission, cooperation, and freedom. I believe it effectively articulates and models the way forward, taking seriously both our theological unity and diversity as a truly positive component of our “one sacred effort.”

Eric Hankins
senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Oxford, Mississippi

I am totally satisfied with the fairness of this document, which does a magnificent job of articulating our shared belief. I wholeheartedly add my full support to this document. I am grateful to each person that has worked so hard to help us speak with Christ-honoring clarity.

Johnny Hunt
pastor, First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Georgia

I am totally supportive of the statement. I believe history teaches us there is room for various shades of thought on this topic. I’m praying we will joyfully coexist and the Gospel will go forth in greater power because of our unity!

David Landrith
senior pastor, Long Hollow Baptist Church, Hendersonville, Tennessee

Prior to our first meeting, I sought input from a variety of lay people as to what they felt our focus should be on an obviously hot topic. Top on the list was an appeal for civility—pleading that we simply learn how to engage the issue of Calvinism respectfully and stop the name calling and rude behavior. I was thrilled that so much of our discussion addressed this problem and bore fruit as our respect grew for one another. Secondly, our appeal for honesty regarding doctrinal convictions on the part of candidates interviewing with churches is, in my mind, the key to solving deep divisions that have arisen in churches that feel betrayed. Churches and ministerial candidates must show integrity in the search process as to who they are and what they believe. I pray Southern Baptists will do three things: stop talking so much about that which they have overheard but not personally studied or verified; actually read our report before judging it; and show up in Houston to witness during Crossover block parties where we demonstrate what we claim to be our priority of pleading with sinners to believe in Christ, confessing to others that “our Lord is mighty to save and that He saves to the uttermost.”

Tammi Ledbetter
homemaker and journalist; member Inglewood Baptist Church, Grand Prairie, Texas

For Christians to work together cooperatively requires broad doctrinal agreement, although not agreement in every point of detail. This statement underlines the broad areas of doctrine upon which the overwhelming majority of us as Southern Baptists agree. It outlines the basis on which we can continue working together cooperatively and constructively for the cause of Christ.

Steve Lemke
provost and director of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, Louisiana
As SBC President I want to thank our chief encouraging officer Dr. Frank Page for his efforts in calling together and meeting with the Calvinism Advisory Group. This group had the difficult task of dealing with a subject that many Southern Baptists have very strong opinions about.

My personal prayer is that this report will be an example of how believers can come together to impact the Kingdom of God and not personal agendas.

Fred Luter
president of the Southern Baptist Convention; senior pastor, Franklin Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans, Louisiana

R. Albert Mohler Jr.
president, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

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There is little that I will sign in the way of corporate statements. My love for the unity in essentials among Southern Baptists for the purpose of getting the Gospel to every human on earth has wrung my signature on this document from my heart. The most important aspect to me is the provision for honesty and integrity for all. God grant that it be so.

Paige Patterson
president, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas

This statement speaks volumes about the ability of all Southern Baptists of good faith and good will to work together eagerly and enthusiastically. As the statement affirms, these tensions have been present within the Southern Baptist Convention from the very beginning of our life and work together. We are people who take theology seriously. But we are also people who take seriously our joy and privilege in working together in service to the Great Commission. We also made a bold statement of support for and agreement in The Baptist Faith & Message. We are a confessional people, gladly affirming together the faith once for all delivered to the saints. I am thankful for every member of this task force and for the privilege of working together in this process and on this historic and timely statement.

R. Albert Mohler Jr.
president, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

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