

# **When Church Historians Distort the Truth: The Problem of Cultural Agenda Dictating Interpretation**

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It is virtually impossible to omit personal bias from historical writing. And even the best of historians sometimes introduce factual error unintentionally. However, the rubric of all good historiography is striving for objectivity and factual precision. The aim should be simply to tell the truth.

Because of the proximate distance of historical events from ourselves, determining what actually occurred is not always an easy matter. Several variables are at work not the least of which is the nature of evidence in terms of both its quantity and quality. Those who lived contemporaneously with a past event also possessed biases that have to be weighed against other types of evidence to ascertain value. But when the preponderance of evidence points in a certain direction, it is foolhardy to ignore it, and unethical to deliberately distort it to achieve a preconceived purpose.

When bias becomes dominated by agenda, distortion is often the result. This is bad enough when non-professional historians are doing it to advance an opinion or refute someone else's, but when those whose vocation is historiography do so, it is particularly troubling. When the historian deliberately twists facts and misrepresents positions to advance an ideology, those who favor that ideology will often excuse or overlook the problem. Even professing evangelical historians have allowed their penchant for a certain cultural agenda to distort their judgment at the expense of truth. But falsehood should not be tolerated particularly from those who should know better.

The purpose of this paper is to make us aware of the pseudo-historical approach and see it for what it is—propaganda. Hopefully, this will enable us to do a couple of things better:

1. Be aware that the popularity of an idea or even a movement may be advanced under pretense or deception. Indeed, the promotion of a movement that is inherently flawed will invariably include distortion.
2. Be more discerning in your historical reading, looking for verifiable assertions and interpretations that correspond to reality.

My procedure will be to mention some examples of historical distortion and then interact with a few significant case studies involving historians who are driven by the cultural agendas of ecumenism and Arminianism (or anti-Calvinism).

## I. CLASSIC EXAMPLES OF HISTORICAL DISTORTION.

**A. *Donation of Constantine.*** One of the most famous forgeries in history, the *Donatio* was purportedly a document from the 4<sup>th</sup> century emperor Constantine granting Pope Sylvester I and his successors imperial authority over the western empire in exchange for baptizing and instructing him in the Christian faith and curing him of leprosy. Many popes used this spurious document to buttress their prodigious claims to temporal supremacy. In this case, papal power was the agenda. However, the Renaissance humanist Lorenzo Valla (c. 1407–1457) proved it to be a forgery by using textual criticism; he showed that the Latin employed was clearly from the 8<sup>th</sup> not the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

**B. *Da Vinci Code.*** A novel (2004) whose author Dan Brown claimed was based on factual history. In reality it is a colossal fabrication to advance Brown's own agenda, which included huge profits from book sales and a movie. The novel advances the preposterous view that the Frankish Merovingians were descendants of children born to Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and that the Catholic Church altered the New Testament and suppressed the true "gospel accounts." Clues to all these "facts" are supposedly hidden in Da Vinci's paintings. In TV interviews, Brown's statements are quite amazing:

Martin Savidge: When we talk about da Vinci and your book, how much is true and how much is fabricated in your storyline?

Dan Brown: *99 percent of it is true.* All of the architecture, the art, the secret rituals, the history, all of that is true, the Gnostic gospels. All of that is...all this fiction, of course, is that there's a Harvard symbologist named Robert Langdon, and all of his action is fictionalized. But the background is all true (CNN interview, May 25, 2003).

Matt Lauer: How much of this is based on reality in terms of things that actually occurred?

Dan Brown: *Absolutely all of it* (Today Show, June 9, 2003).

The following web sites expose many of the errors of the *Da Vinci Code*:

<http://www.carm.org/features/davincicode.htm>

[http://www.rbcdavincicode.com/bta\\_more.php](http://www.rbcdavincicode.com/bta_more.php)

## II. CASE STUDIES OF HISTORICAL DISTORTION.

**A. Promoting a Cultural Agenda of Ecumenism:** Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is The Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

### 1. Brief Summary.

Notre Dame history professor Mark Noll and freelance writer Carolyn Nystrom are strongly

committed to advancing the cause of Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT). Their bias is abundantly reflected in this book. Although not offering a definitive answer to the title's question, they believe that much has been accomplished in Catholic/Protestant dialogue in the last 50 years to give them hope that the Reformation will soon end in the union of these historically disparate Christian traditions. The introduction and first chapter provide a variety of examples highlighting progress in Catholic/Evangelical cooperation, such as the British-based Alpha programs and the Billy Graham crusades. Succeeding chapters treat the history of opposition between Catholics and Protestants until the mid-twentieth century, when Vatican II precipitated a whole series of ecumenical dialogues between representatives of various mainline denominations and Catholics. This is followed by an "evangelical reading" of the official statement of contemporary Roman Catholic doctrine, the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and favorable analysis of "interfaith cooperation" documents highlighted by ECT initiatives. The authors affirm that they have tried to report on the documents they discuss as fairly and objectively as possible, frequently admitting unresolved issues. They also claim that they have been straightforward in assessing the contemporary Catholic Church in light of the cardinal doctrines of the Protestant Reformation—*sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and the universal priesthood of believers.

## 2. Problems.

a. Emphasis on the strengths of Roman Catholicism and the weaknesses of evangelicalism. Evidence is highly selective. For example, in ch. 7, the authors relate several accounts of conversions to Roman Catholicism but completely disregard those who have been converted from it to evangelicalism. In all fairness, Noll and Nystrom should also have mentioned instances in other parts of the world (particularly Latin America) where there is deep animosity between Catholics and evangelicals. And the weaknesses of evangelicalism are couched in terms of anti-Catholic bias, without scriptural support. Unfairly, the authors extol the 1994 Roman Catholic *Catechism* as a document providing doctrinal uniformity and continuity while scolding evangelicals for their lack of a "thorough, clear, and God-centered" account of the Christian faith. Would not Protestant symbols, such as the Heidelberg Catechism, the Augsburg Confession, and the Westminster Confession reflect a Protestant concern for doctrinal continuity and clarity? Perhaps a discussion of such documents is omitted because they excoriate much of Roman Catholic teaching. Also, in discussing the various instances of Roman Catholic and Protestant dialogue, the authors fail to mention that most Protestant groups participating in ecumenical dialogue—Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Baptist—are comprised mostly of liberals, not evangelicals, as evidenced by the deliberate absence of their evangelical counterparts.

b. Historical inaccuracies. Noll and Nystrom state that "Ignatius, who died in 110, could say that only priests in connection with a bishop, in connection with the pope, can offer valid sacraments" (p. 147). Nowhere in Ignatius's writings do we find mention of a "pope." Nor was the term applied to the Roman bishop until the sixth century. In excusing celibacy as an acceptable policy for Catholic clergy, the authors assert that "celibate monks, nuns, and priests kept the Christian faith alive, almost by themselves, for more than one thousand years (roughly 500 to 1500)" (p. 225). However, this statement overlooks a couple of facts: celibacy was never mandated in the western Catholic Church until the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, and Eastern Orthodox

priests have generally been allowed to marry. The authors compliment the Council of Regensburg (1541) as an early attempt to reconcile differences by saying that the “meeting actually reached an agreement on the contentious issue of justification by faith” (p. 50). Yet they fail to mention that *sola* was omitted and that the stricter reformers, like Calvin and Luther, resented the compromises of Melanchthon.<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, the authors devote only three pages to the history of the Reformation and reduce its contribution to three “*sola*” doctrines. And these are not carefully explained. Proper contextual treatment demands that the reformer’s doctrines be juxtaposed against Catholic teachings they believed undermined Christian truth. Scott Manetsch cautions, “Before Noll and Nystrom can answer the question ‘is the Reformation over?’ i.e., whether the historic theological divide between Protestants and Roman Catholics has been successfully bridged, they must first describe with greater precision the central doctrinal convictions and practical religious concerns of sixteenth-century Protestants.”<sup>2</sup>

c. Doctrinal distortions. In their attempt to promote Evangelical/Catholic unity, Noll and Nystrom put points of agreement in the best possible light. Points of disagreement are minimized in order to promote their ecumenical agenda. A obvious example of this regards the Roman Catholic *Catechism*. Noll and Nystrom praise this document: “Evangelicals or confessional Protestants who pick up the *Catechism* will find themselves in for a treat. Sentences, paragraphs, whole pages sound as if they could come from evangelical pulpits, including passages on topics such as the nature of Scripture or the meaning of grace and faith” (p. 116). Yet, the authors admit, the *Catechism* “looks beyond the statement of doctrine to the care of souls” (p. 116). And they say that two thirds of this book of worship most Protestants would agree with. These statements highlight at least two realities: unity for them is to be found in devotional, not necessarily doctrinal, concerns, and one third of the book cannot be condoned by true Protestants because it contains egregious doctrinal error. Sentimental pietism cannot hide the irreconcilable doctrinal differences which the following chart will illustrate.

DOCTRINE	CATHOLIC	PROTESTANT
Authority	Scripture, Tradition, Roman Catholic Magesterium	<i>Sola scriptura, sola dei</i>
Salvation	Justification is progressive and merited	<i>Sola fide, sola gratia</i>
Redemption	Mary as Co-redemptrix	<i>Sola Christus</i>

One could square a circle easier than one could harmonize these differences. Added to these are

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<sup>1</sup>Calvin wrote to William Farel on 12 May 1541, “...they [the Lutherans] hope that in a short time they would begin to see more clearly if the matter of doctrine be left open; therefore they wish to skip over it, and do not dread that equivocation than which nothing can be more hurtful.” And how prophetic his next utterance: “only in their method of proceeding they accommodate themselves too much to the times” (cited in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910], 8:383).

<sup>2</sup>“Discerning the Divide: A Review Article,” *TRINJ* 28 (Spring 2007): 50.

many other additional teachings and practices of Catholicism that no conscientious Protestant would tolerate, such as purgatory, intercession to Mary and the saints, baptismal regeneration, and the seven sacraments, including the Mass in which Christ is re-sacrificed. These are all diametrically opposed to the evangel of Jesus Christ and should be condemned not condoned. The authors lead us to believe that the principal differences between Catholics and evangelicals remain only in the realm of ecclesiology, suggesting that resolution is possible (p. 147). Yet they blithely equivocate on an immensely important issue: “Have Catholics confused one with the other, ascribing to the church those powers and qualities that ought to belong to Jesus Christ alone? Is this another area where the Catholic Church has (according to Protestant understanding) slipped into idolatry? Perhaps so” (p. 149). But a few lines later they can affirm that “the *Catechism* proclaims a deeply Christian faith, and it does so with grace” (p. 150). As D. A. Carson would say about other contents of this book, “That is just rubbish!”<sup>3</sup>

There are more instances of theological double-talk. Perhaps the most stark example of equivocation if not deception is the following comment on page 140:

Salvation by grace through faith is a, if not *the*, pivotal doctrine for evangelical Protestants. Those five words are the nub of the gospel evangelicals proclaim from pulpits and on mission fields. Is this also the faith of Catholics according to their *Catechism*? The answer is both yes and no. Largely, it is yes. As many statements already quoted have shown, Catholics believe that God justifies his people by grace alone, through faith, and that God himself initiates the action. Augustinian evangelicals—whether Baptists, Calvinists, or Lutherans—could hardly say more.

But the problem is the canons of Trent and the *Catechism* have said *more*, to the extent of actually contradicting the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone by grace alone. To Catholics, justification is the same as sanctification<sup>4</sup> and it is achieved meritoriously, and salvific grace is communicated via sacraments. These are the *no* of salvation by grace through faith, amounting to an unbridgeable gap between not only Catholics and Protestants, but between Catholicism and biblical evangelicalism. And yet, incredibly, the authors say a few lines later, “On a theological level, questions of authority and salvation carry the most weight, but it is possible to recognize a remarkable degree of agreement between official Catholic teaching and the beliefs of many evangelicals” (p. 145). And finally, here is probably the epitome of hypocritical double-talk as referenced in ECT IV, “The Communion of Saints”—“While conceding that full unity cannot occur in this life, the signatories describe their task as not to create unity but to ‘give full and faithful expression to the unity that is...[Christ’s] present gift’”

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<sup>3</sup>“What Is Evangelism,” lecture given at Grace Fellowship Church, Toronto, 28 January, 2008.

<sup>4</sup>Interestingly, one Protestant exception to the justification/sanctification conflict is Arminianism. The authors frequently mention the Wesleyans as having more in common with Catholics on various doctrines, including this one: “Arminians, including various followers of Wesley, find this view of salvation quite similar to their own. They too believe that God initiates salvation by offering prevenient grace to all. They also believe that personal choice plays a part in deciding whether salvation is received and, if received, whether a Christian will remain faithful until the end” (p. 141). What the authors fail to mention is that what Catholics and Arminians have in common in this case is semi-Pelagianism! But they do state truly that Arminians obtain salvation personally, whereas Catholics achieve it “*through* the church” (p. 141).

(p. 175). One wonders just what kind of unity Christ grants to those who add to his gospel their own contradictory traditions.

What is also glaringly lacking in *Is The Reformation Over?* is the careful Scriptural exegetical support for the assertions made. Instead, the authors state that their criteria of evaluation are “grounded in both classical Christian theology and the broad history of Christianity” (p. 14). And when Scripture is rarely referenced, it is usually taken out of context. The discussion of debate between Catholics and Protestants is always couched in the context of mutual agreement or disagreement and never brought under the scrutiny of Scripture itself. What we find instead is a repetitive use of appeasement terminology—“understand,” “mutual respect,” “nuanced,” and “Catholic brothers and sisters”—suggesting Christian reciprocity, charity, and unity. But are these sentiments deserving of those who stubbornly maintain teachings contrary to the gospel of Christ?

The premise of the book advances the possibility that the Reformation could be over, based not on the accomplishment of its original task of converting the institutional church to its New Testament ideal, but based upon the notion that fundamental gospel truth can be accommodated to Roman Catholic teachings. The book is actually an attack on the Reformation itself, what it asserted, what it attacked, and what it anticipated—a thorough doctrinal renovation which the Catholic church opposed and still opposes.

This kind of ecumenism, which requires concession of true doctrine, does not advance the gospel of Christ but instead contributes to anti-Christian apostasy.

**Evaluation:** factors impelling the culture of ecumenism.

1. Philosophical: Kantian transcendental idealism and the Hegelian dialectic. Kant maintained the Platonic empirical view that comprehension is subjective and consists of perception, that is, how things appear to us, rather than a concern for what they are in and of themselves. Reality, then, is perception. This seems to govern the ecumenists’ interpretation of history. They are conditioned to see things ideally, as they wish to see them, instead of realistically, as they actually are. Coupled with this idealism, in fact, the modus of achieving it, is dialecticism: Thesis—Catholicism; Antithesis—Protestantism; Synthesis—a unified Christian body (cf. a “middle way of hope,” p. 31). For both Hegel and Kant (from whom Hegel borrowed many of his ideas), freedom is the goal of man achieved by self-determination. This freedom extended to society is utopian. To Hegel, society is fraught with contradictions; freedom is achieved through the reconciliation of these contradictions. The problem is absolute contradictions cannot be reconciled. Therefore, an attempt to do so necessitates changing meaning. That is why Catholic theologian Avery Dulles could sign a document affirming justification by faith alone. He simply changes the meaning of faith to love, and makes justification process instead of punctiliar. This allows him to reconcile irreconcilables (dialectic) and appear to agree with the Reformation doctrine of justification (idealism). Another problem: man cannot achieve moral utopian freedom since he is totally depraved. The answer of the ecumenists is the liberating effects of Christianity, but a reductionist form of it, a liberalized Christianity. It can become all things to all men (one of the few Scripture references cited by Noll and Nystrom). But this does not solve the problem; it only compounds it!

2. Moral: the social gospel, what Timothy George calls, “ecumenism in the trenches.” What dominates the cultural agenda is the social gospel, specifically, saving the world from secularism and immorality. This trumps theology as the principal concern of the authors. The mission Catholics and Protestants can agree upon, Noll and Nystrom tell us, is the improvement of society (see page 175).

3. Sentimental: Christian unity. The ecumenical appeal is constantly directed to patology as the locus of commonality. But the church fathers often erred, disagreed with each other, and did not always develop those doctrines which are later more clearly defined. In promoting ECT, advocates always draw on the similarities between the fathers and the reformers, but there are significant major differences that the reformers themselves acknowledged, regarding the doctrine of justification, for example. True, one need not fully understand justification by faith as the divine means of salvation to become a Christian. The church fathers did not clearly articulate forensic justification. Some completely misunderstood it. But once clearly and accurately defined, we have no excuse to compromise it by opting for ambiguity over clarity.

It is tragic that many of those who advocate this direction are deceived into thinking that they are promoting Christ’s love, when in reality that are contributing to the Apostasy by embracing and promoting that which is inherently anti-Christian. This is much like the religious syncretism of Old Testament apostate Judaism, and it is being encouraged in the name of evangelicalism. Dress it up, put the best face on it, embellish it with pietism and charity, it remains a counterfeit, an imposture, a deceit, and underlying it is the spirit of rebellion which deserves and will evoke divine condemnation.

What perhaps is the most incredible irony of ecumenism is that those who seek Christian unity are willing to compromise the surest thing that would secure it—the evangel of Jesus Christ.

### **Other Ecumenically Driven Histories**

Thomas C. Oden, *Justification Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Oden, professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University Theological School, is noted for his enthusiastic endorsement of ECT, and his most recent books prove this. In *Justification Reader*, he affirms in the introduction that he has “come home to ancient ecumenical Christianity” (p. 1). He suggests that there has been general consensus among Christians on justification by faith, that there is substantial core agreement among the church fathers of the first five centuries, and that the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers were in substantial agreement with them as well. If you limit the statement of the doctrine to “justification by grace through faith” (Oden’s basic premise), yes, there was and is consensus. But if you define the doctrine more precisely as Calvin and other Protestant theologians since him have done, then there are huge differences, since the doctrine itself was distorted by some of the fathers and by later Catholic theologians. In fact, the differences are of such magnitude that they constitute not just a variation of nuance, but what ends up to be entirely separate doctrines. These differences Oden fails to address while promising to “give voice to the truth...without change or distortion” (p. 1). For example,

Augustine, whom the reformers frequently and favorably cite, would agree that “justification is by grace through faith.” But he taught that justification is being made righteous, thereby confusing it with sanctification. He also made the church, via the sacraments, the agent of justifying grace. Second, the Eastern Church virtually has had no doctrine of forensic justification (i.e., imputation of Christ’s righteousness). Instead, it has taught the doctrine of *theosis* (based on a misinterpretation of 2 Peter 1:4), whereby the believer is gradually divinized in the restoration of God’s image in him. Yet Eastern fathers would have affirmed “justification by grace through faith.” Oden selects fragmentary patristic quotes apart from context and without noting the serious differences with Pauline justification, the only reliable point of unanimity. Again, all of this amounts to theological double-talk, since salvation by grace through faith means different things to different people. If Oden were right, then the reformers’ work would have been a recovery, not a discovery, of Pauline justification. One reviewer insightfully asks, “If he [Oden] is correct, then why did Luther and Calvin not recognize that they were teaching in unity with these fathers?”<sup>5</sup>

Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2007).

Oden’s premise in this book is that early African Christianity was indigenous, distinct from European Christianity, played a decisive role in shaping the latter, and that it was the African mind that shaped the development of Christian culture in the world. The work is simply a commercial for ecumenical relations with African Christians. And Oden’s premise simply does not square with reality. Located within the Roman Empire, North African Christianity was born in and influenced by Roman civilization and Greek culture. It is difficult to take Oden seriously when he tells the reader that Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine were uniquely African and not shaped by European influences, when these men communicated and were generally assimilated into a Latin Roman imperial culture.

**B. Promoting a Cultural Agenda of Arminianism:** William R. Estep, “Doctrines Lead to ‘Dunhill,’ Prof Warns” *Baptist Standard* (26 March 1997), p. 12.

1. The article. William R. Estep (1920–2000) was professor of church history, emeritus, at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth. His article is reprinted verbatim from the Texas *Baptist Standard*, 26 March 1997.

Only the most out-of-touch Southern Baptist could be unaware of the attempt on the part of some within our ranks to promote a 19th century version of Calvinism among Southern Baptists as a return to the original theology of the first English Baptists.

This newfound fascination with Calvin and the system of theology that bears his name is both intriguing and puzzling, since most of the ardent advocates of this movement have only a slight knowledge of Calvin or his system as set forth in the Institutes of the Christian Religion. They

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<sup>5</sup>John S. Hammet, review of *The Justification Reader*, by Thomas C. Oden, *Faith and Mission* 20 (Spring 2003): 119.

simply borrow that which they assume to be both biblical and baptistic without adequate research. This is essentially what James P. Boyce did, as reflected in his *Abstract of Systematic Theology*.

Charles Hodge, the most influential of the Princetonian theologians of the 19th century, was Boyce's mentor at Princeton.

Thoroughly enamored with Hodge and his three-volume *Systematic Theology*, Boyce taught Hodge's version of Calvinism at Southern Seminary, which Basil Manly Jr. also incorporated in the seminary's founding document, the *Abstract of Principles* (1858).

These works provide the pretense upon which Ernest C. Reisinger has attempted to call Southern Baptists back to what he conceives to have been their Calvinistic roots. This assumption must be challenged on the basis of the original Baptist vision and its theological insights.

### **JOHN CALVIN (1509–1554)**

Calvin is best known for his *Institutes*, which first appeared in 1536. After several revisions, the definitive edition was published in 1559 in four volumes. He also was the reformer of Geneva. Trained in law, Calvin attempted to form a church-state for which he drew up laws and set up a "consistory," not unlike courts of the inquisition in the medieval Catholic Church. This church court condemned many for 'heresy'—spiritual crimes— some of whom were executed by the civil authorities and others were exiled.

Among those condemned, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake for disagreeing with Calvin on the nature of the Trinity and "anabaptism." Jerome Bolsec was exiled for disagreeing with Calvin on the doctrine of predestination.

Admittedly, this was the 16th century and the pressures on Calvin were enormous, but when all of these factors—political, sociological and religious are considered, Calvin cannot be exonerated.

He was no advocate of religious freedom, but an autocrat who often mistook his own will for the will of God.

Calvin never was able to free himself from his Roman Catholic heritage. The tenacity with which he held to infant baptism, a church-state in which a sin against the church became a crime against the state, and the use of the civil government to enforce conformity to the Genevan theocracy reflect his adherence to the Codex Justinian.

His Old Testament hermeneutics and his uncontrollable temper acerbated his intolerance of those who disagreed with him. A case in point was his quarrel with Jerome Bolsec over predestination.

### **Predestination Controversy**

While it is difficult to state briefly Calvin's view of predestination, perhaps the best summary is that given by Calvin himself:

"By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God by which He determined with Himself whatever He wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation, and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death" (*Institutes*, 3.21.5).

Bolsec could not accept Calvin's position, which seemed to erect a whole system of theology on "eternal decrees" without any reference to Christ or the love that caused God to offer His Son as a sacrifice for sinful humanity.

Bolsec did not deny man's sinful nature or the need of salvation, but his view of election focused on Christ and the grace made available to believers through faith in Him.

He also recognized the individual's ability to respond in faith or to reject God's gift of salvation. In doing so, there was no room in Geneva for Jerome Bolsec. He was expelled from the city.

### **Baptists and Calvinism**

Baptists arose out of English Puritan-Separatist movement, which was Calvinistic, but they modified their Calvinistic heritage to a considerable degree.

The first English Baptists of record (1608), came to be known as "General Baptists," since they believed in "general atonement"—that Christ died for all and not just for the elect. Their Calvinism almost completely vanished under Anabaptist-Mennonite influence.

The "Particular Baptists" (1641) were so designated because they held with the English Puritans' belief in "particular atonement"—that Christ died only for the elect.

But they also modified their Calvinism, as Glen Stassen has shown, under the influence of Menno Simons' *Foundation Book*, which they quoted in the First London Confession of 1644. Its revision in 1646 reveals a further departure from Calvinism in their rejection of the fourfold ministry of Calvin's invention and by greatly enlarging his article on religious freedom and the separation of church and state.

While Baptists never have been doctrinaire Calvinists, as a careful study of the sources reveal, there have been some Baptists from time to time who have advocated such a position. When John Ryland Sr. called William Carey "a miserable enthusiast" and told him to sit down, that God "would save the heathen without your help or mine," he reflected the hyper-Calvinism of John Gill, who set forth his position in numerous works and prided himself on never extending an invitation for a sinner to trust Christ during his entire London pastorate of more than 50 years.

Andrew Fuller wrote *The Gospel Worthy of all Acceptation* against Gill's Calvinism, concluding: "Had matters gone on but a few years, the Baptists would have become a perfect dunghill in society."

Fuller's modification of Calvinism among the Baptists made possible the foreign mission movement of which Carey became the catalyst.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon often has been cited by Baptists as a staunch Calvinist. At times, the young Spurgeon claimed to be exactly that, but at other times it is clear he was neither a hyper-Calvinist nor even a consistent Calvinist.

A. C. Underwood, in *A History of English Baptists*, writes that Spurgeon's "rejection of a limited atonement would have horrified John Calvin."

According to Underwood, Spurgeon often prayed, "Hasten to bring in all Thine elect, and then

elect some more.” The mature Spurgeon confided in Archbishop Benson, “I’m a very bad Calvinist, quite a Calvinist—I look on to the time when the elect will be all the world.”

### **Problems with Calvinism**

Apparently Baptists always have had problems with an unmodified Calvinism. Only a few can be mentioned here.

First, it is a system of theology without biblical support.

It assumes to know more about God and the eternal decrees upon which it is based than God has chosen to reveal in scripture or in Christ. To say God created some people for damnation and others for salvation is to deny that all have been created in the image of God. It also reflects upon both God’s holiness and His justice, as portrayed in the Bible. Further, Calvinism appears to deny John 3:16, John 1:12, Romans 1:16, Romans 10:9–10, Ephesians 2:8–10, and numerous other passages of scripture that indicate, as Baptists confessions have consistently stated, that salvation comes to those who respond to God’s grace in faith.

Second, Calvinism’s God resembles Allah, the god of Islam, more than the God of grace and redeeming love revealed in Jesus Christ.

Third, Calvinism robs the individual of responsibility for his/her own conduct, making a person into a puppet on a string or a robot programmed from birth to death with no will of his/her own.

Fourth, historically, Calvinism has been marked by intolerance and a haughty spirit. Calvin’s Geneva, the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) and the Regular Baptists (Hardshells, Primitives and Two Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists) are only some of numerous examples of this Calvinistic blight.

Fifth, logically, Calvinism is anti-missionary. The Great Commission is meaningless if every person is programmed for salvation or damnation, for [then] evangelism and missionary efforts are exercises in futility.

Apparently, Calvinism is an excursion into speculative theology with predictable results, which we as Southern Baptists can ill afford.

It also introduces another divisive element in a badly divided denomination. If the Calvinizing of Southern Baptists continues unabated, we are in danger of becoming “a perfect dunghill” in American society, to borrow a phrase from Andrew Fuller.

## **2. Erroneous statements and distortions.**

a. Calvin died in 1564, not 1554. More seriously, assaults upon his character are both unnecessary and irrelevant to his theological position, the subject under consideration. Such attacks are a poor substitute for analytical treatment of Calvin’s theology.

b. Estep insults the “ardent advocates,” of Calvinism, such as James P. Boyce, as having little understanding of Calvin’s system of theology. Boyce, according to Estep, got his theology directly from his teacher, Charles Hodge, and that Boyce was unfamiliar with Calvin’s

*Institutes*, after having taught theology for over 30 years! Anyone reading Boyce's *Abstract of Systematic Theology* would know that it is not merely a repetition of Hodge but reveals a familiarity with Calvin and Francis Turretin.

c. Bolsec is cited as having only a personal dispute with Calvin; yet the former was a notorious heretic and liar. When he recanted his Protestantism and returned to Catholicism, he wrote a scurrilous biography of Calvin, accusing the reformer of sodomy and fornication without any basis of fact. But Estep mentions Bolsec only to demean Calvin.

d. To Estep's assertion that Calvin erected his theology on eternal decrees without any reference to the redeeming love of Christ, Roger Nicole responds that predestination is not discussed until the end of the *Institute's* third book, and that Calvin has much to say about the mercy and love of God through Christ.<sup>6</sup> Anyone reading Calvin's writings would readily see this.

e. It is difficult to understand how Estep could say that Spurgeon claimed to be a staunch but not a "consistent" Calvinist. Spurgeon's isolated and casual comments implying a universal atonement<sup>7</sup> must be weighed against his numerous deliberate expressions advocating unconditional election and limited atonement such as the following:

We do not believe that Christ made any effectual atonement for those who are forever damned. We dare not think that the blood of Christ was ever shed with the intention of saving those whom God foreknew never would be saved—and some of whom were even in Hell when Christ, according to some men's account, died to save them<sup>8</sup>

And yet Estep cites A. C. Underwood as saying Spurgeon rejected unlimited atonement. Tom Ascol states, "To suggest that the great evangelist Charles Haddon Spurgeon was not a thorough-going Calvinist is like suggesting that the Pope is less than Roman Catholic"<sup>9</sup>

2. Distortions regarding Calvin's theology. Estep makes five assertions which do not hold up under scrutiny.

a. "It is a system of theology without biblical support." Nicole counters that Calvin's

<sup>6</sup>"An Open Letter to Dr. William R. Estep," *Founders Journal* 29 (Summer 1997): 15.

<sup>7</sup>The citation of Spurgeon's comment to Archbishop Benson comes from W. Y. Fullerton's biography of his son: *Thomas Spurgeon: A Biography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1919), p. 22. The quote first appeared in the *London Times* as a reference to Benson's diary. In other words, Fullerton got it third hand! Also, one should keep in mind that both Fullerton and Underwood had no sympathy for Calvinism.

<sup>8</sup>A Sermon Delivered on Sabbath Morning, February 28, 1858, by the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens.

<sup>9</sup>"The Trouble With Frank Page's *The Trouble With TULIP*," Founders Ministries Blog, entry posted 4 June 2006, <http://www.founders.org/blog/2006/06/trouble-with-frank-pages-trouble-with.html> (accessed 2 October 2008).

*Institutes*, Book III:21–24 (re: election), cites 173 biblical references, including 3 of the 5 Estep alleges against him.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, all of the verses Estep cites have been explained by many Calvinist theologians in commentaries and systematic theologies, but evidently not to his satisfaction. Significantly, Nicole notes that Estep deplores the influence Calvin’s theology has had on Baptists. Yet, they did not accept his view of baptism. “Therefore, something else than Calvin’s authority [must have] led them to follow him in his views on the doctrines of grace; I say it is the authority of Scripture and its teaching on divine sovereignty as well as human responsibility.”<sup>11</sup> Finally, James White notes that Estep has conveniently omitted any discussion or even reference to “such Reformed minefields as Romans 8 and 9, Ephesians 1, and John 6:35–45.”<sup>12</sup>

b. “Calvinism’s God resembles Allah” over a God of grace and redeeming love. When one considers the Puritan writings (Edwards, Owen, et. al.), the sermons of Spurgeon, and the more recent evangelical treatments of the doctrines of grace by Boice, Bridges, Nettles, Sproul, and Piper, one can readily observe them extolling God’s matchless grace in providing an undeserved and glorious salvation.

c. “Calvinism robs the individual of responsibility for his/her own conduct.” Again, such irresponsible statements ignore the writings of many who provide answers, such as Edwards’s signal work on *Freedom of the Will*, and the anthology *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

d. “Calvinism has been marked by intolerance and a haughty spirit.” This hardly bears comment except to say that it is more caricature than fact. It is unfair to indict an entire movement on the basis of some proud individuals who may be in it. Estep implies that it is Calvinism that produces this sort of attitude when in reality the doctrines of grace should produce abject humility. Such descriptions by Estep lead Albert Mohler to say that “if Calvinism is accurately represented by Dr. Estep’s treatment, I will have nothing to do with it.... few of Calvin’s friends or enemies will recognize Calvinism as presented in Estep’s article.”<sup>13</sup>

e. “Calvinism is anti-missionary.” This is so contrary to fact that it is hard to believe that a historian of Estep’s stature would actually believe it. What is quite ironic is his citation from Andrew Fuller who was alarmed over the possibility that hyper-Calvinism would make of the Baptist religion “a perfect dunghill.” Yet Fuller, along with Carey and his supporting pastors, considered themselves evangelical Calvinists.

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<sup>10</sup>“An Open Letter to Dr. William R. Estep,” p. 15.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup>“Doctrines Lead to Solid Biblical Theology: A Response to Dr. William Estep,” Alpha and Omega Ministries, <http://vintage.aomin.org/DoctrinesLead.html> (accessed 2 October 2008).

<sup>13</sup>“The Reformation of Doctrine and Renewal of the Church,” *Founders Journal* 29 (Summer 1997): 10. In my estimation, Mohler’s article is the best doctrinal critique of Estep.

**Evaluation:** impulses of Arminianism (anti-Calvinism)

1. Evangelistic soul-winning. Critics of Calvinism, in their zeal for revival, habitually confuse five-point Calvinism with hyper-Calvinism and believe that both are non-evangelistic. However, true Calvinists have always been evangelistic and have opposed evangelism-stifling hyper-Calvinism. One of the most frequent accusations by Arminian-types against Calvinism is that it is anti-missions. Yet most are aware of the fact that many early missionaries and influential leaders of revival in America's history were 5-point Calvinists. Usually there are two responses to this: a) ignore the fact or b) say that these men were able to "win souls" in spite of their Calvinism, not because of it. Again, anyone who carefully reads the sermons of Jonathan Edwards or George Whitefield will realize that their evangelism was based upon and motivated by the sovereignty of God.

2. Rationalization. Since they assume that one cannot be a consistent Calvinist and also evangelistic, Arminian-types make accusations based on false dichotomies, such as: one cannot hold to unconditional election and a sinner's acceptance of salvation by faith, divine sovereign predestination eliminates human responsibility and free will, and if the Calvinist view of predestination is true, man would be a robot. This really amounts to straw-man argumentation, i.e., working from the premise that the Calvinist cannot be truly evangelistic. But this kind of reasoning also imposes on Scripture the controlling principle of human authority. The Arminian continually "appeals to conscience, common sense, reason,...and experience"<sup>14</sup> What is perhaps most ironic about Arminian Christianity is that those who advocate an evangel conditioned by man's will fall prey to the very humanistic ideologies they purport to oppose—rationalism and empiricism. **Note how much this approach is like what we find with advocates of ecumenism; the common denominator (although applied in different contexts) is empiricism! In the final analysis both make man, not Scripture, the final authority.**

3. Human free will. Arminian types operate within a culture of human freedom and individual initiative and ability. This view of man was promoted heavily by Charles Grandison Finney, who built his evangelistic methodology on New Haven Pelagianism. Finney denied original sin, but other Arminian-types believe that man possesses the ability to respond to the gospel, while affirming total depravity. The solution is found in prevenient grace which God supposedly grants every man, thereby allowing him ability to either accept or reject the gospel of his own volition. This negates irresistible grace.

Estep (and other Arminians) would have done well to heed the words of Southern Baptist theologian and educator, John A. Broadus:

The people who sneer at what is called Calvinism might as well sneer at Mont Blanc. We are not in the least bound to defend all of Calvin's opinions or actions, but I do not see how any one who really understands the Greek of the Apostle Paul or the Latin of Calvin or Turretin can fail to see that these latter did not interpret and formulate substantially what the former teaches (Broadus

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<sup>14</sup>David Doran review of *What Love Is This?* by Dave Hunt, *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003: 122.

letter written to the *Western Recorder* from Lausanne, Switzerland, 2 September 1891)<sup>15</sup>

### **Other Arminian-Driven Accounts:**

Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This? Calvin's Misrepresentation of God* (Sisters, OR: Loyal Publishing, 2002).

Dave Hunt, self-styled evangelical apologist and commentator, has written several popular books on various timely subjects. This one is perhaps his most controversial. David Doran has written a detailed review of this popular work. He writes, "Dave Hunt has moved beyond offering a different interpretation of the doctrine of salvation; he has engaged in an attack on important biblical truths and has opened the door to serious, potentially deadly error."<sup>16</sup> Doran candidly shows how Hunt's book suffers from shoddy research and documentation, misrepresentation of sources, incompetent exegesis, and flawed argumentation. Again, we are confronted with the basic straw-man argument of the Arminian which no true Calvinist would accept: "here we confront a major problem with Calvinism: its denial of God's infinite love for all. That God would choose to save only a select few and leave the rest to suffer eternal damnation would be contrary to His very nature of infinite love and mercy as the Bible presents Him."<sup>17</sup> This view essentially denies the sovereign and righteous character of God.

Frank S. Page, *A Closer Examination of The Five Points of Calvinism* (Canton, GA: Riverstone Group, 2006).

Frank Page, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention (2006) and pastor of First Baptist Church, Taylors, SC, made this contribution to the ongoing Arminian/Calvinist controversy taking place in the SBC. Page attempts to travel a "middle-of-the-road" biblicist position, accepting neither Calvinism nor Arminianism. But he ends up actually advocating Arminian views in what he calls "Scriptural Soteriology," i.e., man has ability based on prevenient grace, election centers on Christ, men are "elect" at the time they believe in him, and Christ dies indiscriminately for all men. He concludes by agreeing with William Estep that Calvinism "'is a system of theology without biblical support.' Manmade doctrines will always fall!" (p. 74).

Much like Hunt's book, *TULIP* is everywhere flawed with simplistic and inaccurate argumentation, poor documentation, and faulty exegesis. For example, Page states that Calvin believed the image of God in Adam was "destroyed" by the Fall (p. 21). He should have said it was thoroughly corrupted, not destroyed. He says elsewhere that Calvinists teach by unconditional election that "personal volition or faith has nothing to do with [salvation]" (p. 22).

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<sup>15</sup>Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Life and Letters of John Albert Broadus* (reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1987), pp. 396–97.

<sup>16</sup>Review of *What Love Is This?* p. 102.

<sup>17</sup>*What Love Is This* p. 100.

This is utterly false. Likewise, he says Arminians teach that “there was still enough good left in mankind for him/her to accept Christ for salvation” (p. 26). No, Arminius taught total depravity. Page assumes that all Calvinists hold to double-predestination, tainting them with “hyper-Calvinism.” Many Baptists, however, have espoused unconditional election without reprobation (e.g., the First and Second London Baptist Confessions). An example of poor exegesis is found in his treatment of Roman 9. Page argues, on the basis of verse 12—“the elder shall serve the younger”—that God is choosing the second over the first for service. “Election is God’s way of selecting to do His bidding. The issue is service, not salvation” (p. 64). Page concludes his book with the worn out myth that Calvinism kills evangelism. “If one studies the pages of history, one will see that Calvinistic theology (Five Point) has encouraged a slackening of the aggressive evangelistic and missionary heartbeat of the church” (pp. 74–75). Tom Ascol responds, “One cannot help but wonder what pages of what history he has in mind.”<sup>18</sup>

These are examples (among many) of well-educated and supposedly well-read professionals who distort facts to serve their purposes. They have chosen to deal with their subjects idealistically (often superficially), not realistically. The problem is they have acceded to a culture that is predisposed to biblical and theological imprecision in favor of anthropocentrism, the governing influence of both ecumenism and Arminianism. Instead of combating these false systems as unbiblical, they have decided to promote them as part of their cultural bias. But in doing so they have distorted the truth.

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<sup>18</sup>“The Trouble With Frank Page’s *The Trouble With TULIP*.”