

Responses to Dr. Steve Lemke

By Timmy Brister (September-October 2008)

1. Steve Lemke and Christian Scholarship

Sometimes the harder decision to make is not how to respond but whether to respond at all. When NOBTS came out with [the Fall edition of *The Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry*](#), I encountered such a dilemma. [Dr. Steve Lemke](#), provost of [New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary](#), has the lead article entitled, “What Is a Baptist? Nine Marks That Separate Baptists from Presbyterians” which warrants a response not only from Calvinists but Christians in general, for I contend that Lemke fails not only in the arena of scholarship but also in the practice of a Christian. As followers of Christ, we are called to “[speak the truth in love](#),” and having read his article several times, I fail to find a commitment both to Christian love and biblical truth.

In the days ahead, I plan on responding to Lemke’s article, not because I believe he will be convinced of his errors, but because as Christians first and Southern Baptists second, the standard we set for one another, whether it is on a blog or in a journal, should be higher than what we are seeing today. I am persuaded that any fair-minded reader, Calvinist or not, will find Lemke’s treatment on this subject simply unacceptable, even if it is couched in a scholarly journal.

For those of you who have read my blog for any length of time know that I am not unfamiliar with the caricatures, careless rhetoric, and conspiratorial agendas of Baptist non-Calvinists (I use that term because non-Calvinist identify themselves by what they are not rather than what they are for). I have documented articles, messages, and blogposts that span over a decade, and apparently those same caricatures, attacks, and divisive agendas continue today despite the dismal ecclesiological landscape across the SBC. Unfortunately, the merits of Calvinism often fail to be addressed due to the demerits of unChristian approaches to the topic.

Johnny Hunt, current President of the Southern Baptist Convention, was one of the men who led several years ago but has since stopped the campaign (as far as I know) against Calvinism (or at least misrepresenting it), and in the spirit of his call for peace among brethren, unity in the mission, and a passion for the Gospel, I urge other Southern Baptist leaders to reject and denounce such tomfoolery at the expense of Christian charity and biblical clarity. Incidentally enough, Lemke advertises in the same journal the upcoming John 3:16 Conference where non-Calvinists will be addressing “five-point Calvinism.” Lemke himself [will be speaking on “irresistible grace”](#) - a doctrine which he misrepresents in his current article. If Lemke’s approach, inaccuracy, and scholarship is any indication or foretaste of what the John 3:16 Conference will turn into, this will be one giant leap into the wrong direction for Southern Baptists.

Lemke has been corrected both in private and in public on his errors regarding Calvinism. His first article, “[The Future of Southern Baptist as Evangelicals](#)“, attempts to make the case for “hyper-Calvinism” in the SBC. Drs. Tom Ascol ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) and Ray Van Neste ([here](#))

have responded to Lemke's errors, but apparently Lemke continues to assert such errors. Half of the current article, I should mention, is nothing but a word-for-word regurgitation of the older article, except that "hyper-Calvinism" has been removed. So three years later, we get the same thing. I know that if one of my professors saw that I had incorrectly cited sources, made assertions about people without footnoted verification, misrepresented the positions of others, or copy and pasted an old paper into a current one, it would have immediately been returned to me as unacceptable—and yet Lemke manages to do all of these in one article. Whether it was questioning the journalistic integrity of Collin Hansen, the re-wording of Timothy George's ROSES, the outright distortion of Bethlehem Baptist Church's position on church membership and baptism, the smearing of Calvinists in attempt to "classify" them, misunderstanding of Presbyterian beliefs on infant baptism vs. infant salvation, or the poor treatment of Al Mohler's theological triage, Lemke has shown an unwillingness to deal accurately with the facts and charitably with those whom he disagrees. And because of that, I chosen to respond as a Christian, and yes, who happens to believe in the doctrines of grace.

In both his articles, Lemke writes the following:

"There would appear to be a strong possibility that the Southern Baptist Convention may become embroiled in what could be called the 'Battle of Geneva.' Calvinism could be the most explosive and divisive issue facing us in the near future. This issue has already split literally dozens of churches, and it holds the potential to split the entire Convention."

Let's give credit where credit is due. It is not the Calvinists but the non-Calvinists who continued to use the language Lemke describes above. Whether it is Nelson Price calling [evangelical Calvinism an oxymoron](#), Ergun Caner calling [Calvinists "worse than Muslims,"](#) the late Jerry Falwell calling [limited atonement a "heresy,"](#) or the typical sound referring to a nebulous group of Calvinists who are "extreme, hyper, and aggressive," this language befits those who consider Calvinism, as Jerry Vines does, a "[Baptist Battle](#)." At one moment, Lemke says that "Calvinism is a valid expression of the Christian faith and of the Baptist tradition," but just a few pages later he says that "Southern Baptists have always **tolerated** five-point Calvinism." Is the attitude of *tolerating* "a valid expression of the Christian faith and of the Baptist tradition" commendable? The fact is, they are wanting a Battle of Geneva. Calvinists are not. Calvinists only want to stop the smears and hold fast the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

There is a movement going on today in the SBC focusing on a "Great Commission Resurgence" focusing on the centrality of the gospel and the priority of the mission in our lives and in our churches. This is perhaps the most encouraging development in my lifetime as a Baptist (I was born in 1979 at the beginning of the Conservative Resurgence). On the other hand, there are the sad chronicles of failed attempts to excommunicate Calvinists from the Southern Baptist family. I believe we should all be building bridges, not tearing them down. And yes, it begins with **being the bridge to other people** who are not like you or don't think the same way you do. On this account, I wish that Lemke this time around would have heeded that call and sought for the unity Jesus prayed for among His people. We can strongly disagree, but we cannot do so unlovingly or at the expense the truth. We need good scholarship that holds fast to the truth, but we need more than that, we need *Christian* scholarship that does so in the spirit and humility of Christ.

Related Articles:

- * [The Resurgence of Steve Lemke's Argument Against Calvinism](#)
- * [Tom Ascol's Response to Dr. Steve Lemke, Part 1](#)
- * [Tom Ascol's Response to Dr. Steve Lemke, Part 2](#)
- * [Tom Ascol's Response to Dr. Steve Lemke, Part 3](#)
- * [Ray Van Neste's Response to Dr. Steve Lemke](#)
- * [Joe Thorn's Response to Dr. Steve Lemke](#)
- * [John 3:16 for Everyone](#)

2. [Steve Lemke on Collin Hansen and Provocation](#)

In the introduction to his article, “What Is a Baptist?: Nine Marks That Separate Baptists from Presbyterians,” Dr. Steve Lemke talks about the current resurgence of Calvinism among Southern Baptists and provides a footnote in which he provides a “for what it’s worth” statement regarding Collin Hansen’s journalism. For those of you who may not be aware of who Collin Hansen is, he is an editor at *Christianity Today* and the author of the article “[Young, Restless, and Reformed: Calvinism Is Making a Comeback - and Shaking Up the Church](#)” (September 22, 2006) as well as the recently published book, [Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists](#) (Crossway, 2008).

On Steve Lemke

In the footnote, Lemke writes the following:

“For what it’s worth, Hansen described me as having ‘the most provocative comments in the SBC’ regarding concerns about Calvinism. Clearly, many have said and are saying far harsher things than I. In the phone interview, Hansen repeatedly tried to lead me to say negative things about Calvinism in general and a sister SBC seminary in particular, which I refused to do. However, his article portrays me as a naysayer to Calvinism, which does not reflect my position accurately.”

First, what was Hansen describing when he was referring to “provocative comments” by Lemke? Here is what Collin writes in his book:

*“[Frank] Page can’t claim the SBC’s most provocative comments about Calvinism. Those **might** belong to Steve Lemke, provost of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. ‘I believe that [Calvinism] is **potentially the most explosive and divisive issue** facing us in the near future,’ he warned in 2005. ‘It has been an issue that has split literally dozens of churches, and it **holds the potential to split the entire convention.**’*

Lemke sees the rising generation of Southern Baptist ministers as ‘the most Calvinist we have seen in several generations.’ He doubts that Calvinism has yet reached its high-water mark in the SBC. And that spells trouble, according to Lemke. Baptism and membership figures, he said, shows that Founders churches lack commitment to evangelism.

'For many people, if they're convinced that God has already elected those who will be elect . . . I don't see how humanly speaking that can't temper your passion, because you know you're not that crucial to the process,' Lemke explained" (emphasis mine).

- Collin Hansen, Young, Restless, Reformed, 86.

As you can see, Collin qualified his comments about Lemke by saying that he **might** have the most provocative statements. On a point that I will address later, Lemke comes away with the conclusion that Calvinists are not evangelistic or committed to missions because they know they're "not that crucial to the process." Incidentally enough, this very faulty research compelled then president of the SBC, Bobby Welch, to insert a portion of Lemke's article into the FBC Daytona Beach newsletter (July 10, 2005) arguing that "no clearer answer could be given between Calvinism and the Great Commission" than what Lemke revealed in his "study." Furthermore, Lemke considers Calvinism to be the "most explosive and divisive issue" such that it has "the potential to split the entire convention." But I have to ask you, who is making Calvinism an issue? Who is lobbing grenades across the SBC landscape? Who is on the attack both in the public and in the press? Nelson Price, Lonnie Wilkey, Jerry Vines, Malcolm Yarnell, Steve Lemke, Elmer Towns, Bill Harrell, Ergun Caner, John Connell, Frank Page, Johnny Hunt, Fisher Humphreys, Jack Graham, Roy Fish, Bill Wilks, Dick Lincoln, Norman Jameson, and the like? Since 2000, all of these men have sought gone after Calvinism to make it an "explosive" and "divisive" issue. If it splits the convention, we will know where the fault line came from.

But secondly, what Collin did *not* mention was the use of the term "hyper-Calvinistic soteriology" in his former paper entitled "[The Future of Southern Baptists as Evangelicals](#)." In this paper, Lemke refers to two types of Calvinism (as contrasted to the four in the latter paper). Lemke writes,

*"One stream is what we might call **hard hyper-Calvinism** (often associated with the Founders Movement), and the other is a softer baptistic Calvinism."* (emphasis mine)

Over the last five years, the charge of "hyper-Calvinism" has been used without qualification or substantiation (see Yarnell's "[The Heart of a Baptist](#)" for further examples of this). It is a term that is employed to stigmatize a group of Calvinists who otherwise, at least historically speaking, would be called "consistent Calvinists" (apparently, Lemke argues that Dortian Calvinism, that is five-point Calvinism, is the same thing as "hyper-Calvinism"). But "hard hyper-Calvinism" comports with the attempt to argue that Calvinists neither believe in the love of God for sinners nor the responsibility to evangelize the lost. Simply put, it is a provocative statement which bears no substance. It is not historically accurate nor does it correspond to the character or ministry of Baptist Calvinists today. Granted, there may be a hyper-Calvinist or two in the SBC, but when called upon to name the hyper-Calvinists, inquirers are given the silent treatment. Even in the current article by Lemke, while he inserts much of what is said in the former article, one thing he leaves out is his usage of "hard hyper-Calvinism." What we have seen in short order is the initial attempt to defeat Calvinism have turned into attempts to police Calvinists with ultimatums from the top-down, and if that doesn't work, then simply smear them and misrepresent their position. This isn't dealing charitably with Calvinists or accurately with Calvinism.

On Collin Hansen

Now regarding Collin Hansen, I feel that I might say a word or two “for it’s worth.” In full disclosure, since his initial interview of me in May 2005, Collin and I have become good friends, and we recently talked about Lemke’s thoughts regarding the phone interview. While in Louisville for the 2005 New Attitude Conference, Collin and I met for what ended up to be a three hour interview and discussion about my life, the SBC, and his future book. I cannot recall exactly how Collin was directed to meet with me, but the phone conversations prior to our breakfast I recall was the impetus to creating the “chronological compilation” for both his purposes and mine.

During the interview, I shared some deeply personal and difficult times in my life, much of which I had not made public. I shared this with him, not knowing whether such sensitive information would be accurately portrayed in the public. Anyone who reads the section on my life will see that my experiences were not exactly of “mountaintop” nature. In any case, weeks after the interview Collin and I corresponded again, and I requested two things: (1) that names of individuals and churches not be mentioned for their benefit, and (2) an opportunity to review the final version simply for factual purposes. In every request, Collin was respectful and gracious, allowing me opportunity to ensure that the account was accurate and objective, even when the retelling of the events in my past were revealing painful scars.

Anyone who has ever been interviewed by a reporter that oftentimes they pick and choose at will what they want to include in their report, and you have nothing to say about it. Statements are often taken out of context and/or are inaccurately stated for editorial purposes. Collin did none of this, and for that I am grateful.

Related Articles:

- * [Interview with Collin Hansen, Part 1](#)
- * [Interview with Collin Hansen, Part 2](#)
- * [Interview with Collin Hansen, Part 3](#)
- * [Reflections on “Young, Restless, and Reformed” Article](#)

3. Steve Lemke on “Four Streams” of Calvinism, Part 1

As I mentioned in [my previous post](#), in 2005, Lemke attempted to make the case for two streams of Calvinists in the SBC - “hard hyper-Calvinists” and a “softer Baptist Calvinism.” In 2008, those two labels have been replaced and expanded into four streams. Before I interact with Lemke’s labeling, there are some *a priori* matters to bring up in this regard.

For the most part, labels are not helpful. They are usually generic, over-simplified, and do not factor in the flexibility or fluidity of a movement. For instance, the label “fundamentalist” is one that is used for Mark Driscoll and Bob Jones, and there are a whole lot of differences between the two! Furthermore, labels are often used as a way of speaking from the perspective of an expert. From the information provided by Lemke, one would be led to believe that he is an insider among Baptist Calvinists, that he, more than anyone else, is entitled and privileged to be

the one who creates the labels and categorizes people accordingly. But the fact is, Lemke is clearly unfamiliar with the Reformed Resurgence. Simple fact checking reveals that *he does not state* the title of [Founders Ministries](#) correctly (he refers to it as Founder's Movement) and also wrote that the 2006 Together for the Gospel Conference "was held on the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary campus" when in fact *it was held at The Galt House* in downtown Louisville. The misinformation on such easily verifiable facts lead one to question whether Lemke is qualified to make such classifications about the "four streams" of Calvinism today in the SBC.

But Lemke's stigmatizing of certain Calvinists is not an unfamiliar practice in the SBC. Consider the similar comments of Jerry Vines, Frank Cox, and Johnny Hunt as I juxtapose them for you (all comments were made in 2008).

"I have had a number of friends who are five-point Calvinists. I have had them preach in my church, and we have had fellowship together. It hasn't been a particular problem. . . . But there is a new, there is a new emphasis on Calvinism today that is militant, hostile, and aggressive, and it disrupts churches, and it kills evangelism. That's where the problem arises as I see it today."

- Jerry Vines ([source](#))

"Some of my dearest friends in life hold the Calvinist view. . . . They are not changing me, and I guess I am not changing them, but we love each other. But there is a part of this new strain of Calvinism that I see in Southern Baptist life. . . . What I see in Southern Baptist life right now, there is a thing, I don't know, for a lack of better word I would describe it as aggressive hyper-Calvinism, or hyper-Calvinism in an aggressive form."

- Frank Cox ([source](#))

"Some of my best friends are Calvinists. They are men of great integrity; we have wonderful discussions; we have great debates; we have differences; but we have chosen to love one another and to say, 'Let's preach the gospel, and let's let it fall where it will.' But normally it is the hyper-Calvinists that is stirring the pot, who would actually move from discussion and debate to destruction . . ."

- Johnny Hunt ([source](#))

Do you see the talking points among the non-Calvinists? I could provide you with several more, but these should suffice in showing the similarity between them. I should add, however, that Vines stated in Hansen's book that the "militant, hostile, and aggressive" Calvinists he is referring to includes Founders Ministries (*Young, Restless, Reformed*, 84).

But the irony behind the titles, labeling, and smearing of Calvinists is that these Southern Baptists will not "put their cards on the table" when it comes to their soteriology. "We are biblicists," they say. Or, "We're Baptists." Well, the problem is that no one knows how a "biblicist" is defined, and a "baptist" is another category (ecclesiology) altogether. Indeed, the non-Calvinists are defined by what they are not (against) rather than what they really believe (what they are for). Imagine if Calvinists decided to come up with their own labels and use them to stigmatize these non-Calvinists. What kind of response do you think they would get?

In any case, let's begin with what Lemke has to say about his four streams.

1. "Founder's (sic) Movement Calvinists"

"Founder's (sic) Movement Calvinists tend to look backward nostalgically to Calvinists of prior generations, to make their Calvinism the focal point of their ministries, to be rather assertive and defensive about their Calvinism, and to be less evangelistic than the average Southern Baptist church. They primarily interact with and attend conferences with other Calvinists."

I will address Lemke's footnote about his "study" done on Founders-friendly churches at a later time, but let me simply address his categorization. First, Lemke says that Founders Ministries is looking backward to Calvinists of prior generations. The implication Lemke is making is that appreciating the influence, thinking, and ministries of men like James P. Boyce, Basil Manly Jr., John A. Broadus, Patrick H. Mell, John L. Dagg, and others is not something we should be grateful for. Yet, looking back does much to prevent a chronological snobbery in our current age, helps us learn from them (both in their successes and failures), and causes us to consider how in God's providence, we are standing on the shoulders of such giants today (I would recommend what Timothy George called "retrieval for the sake of renewal" which he shared in [his address at the 2006 Baptist Identity Conference](#)). Now looking forward, consider the faces that represent the populous of Founders Ministries. While indeed Founders does look back, it is also looking forward, investing in a generation of young ministers who are committed to the gospel and the church, which leads me to my second point.

Lemke argue that Founders Calvinists want "to make their Calvinism the focal point of their ministries." On the "[About Us](#)" page of Founders website, the purpose statement is the following:

The purpose of Founders Ministries is the recovery of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in the reformation of local churches. We believe intrinsic to this recovery is the promotion of the Doctrines of Grace in their experiential application to the local church particularly in the areas of worship and witness. This is to be accomplished through a variety of means focusing on conferences and including publication, education, pastoral training and other opportunities consistent with the purpose. Each of the ministries will be developed with special attention to achieve a healthy integration of doctrine and devotion.

Our abiding concerns:

- + *We desire to be orthodox without being obnoxious.*
- + *We want to be confessional, yet contemporary.*
- + *We are Southern Baptist, though not sectarian.*
- + *Our goal is to be doctrinally and devotionally balanced.*

Regardless of whether it is the [Founders Journal](#), the [Founders blog](#), [Founders Conferences](#), or whatever other criteria you want to use, what you find is that the assertion Lemke makes that Founders Calvinists "make their Calvinism the focal point of their ministries" is simply not true. The recovery of the gospel and the reformation of local churches are central and foremost in the

purpose of Founders Ministries, and any indication either statistical or anecdotally speaking, the Southern Baptist Convention is needing both.

In part 2 of my interaction with Lemke's "four streams," I will pick up with the other three "streams" and offer an alternative point-of-view.

Related Articles:

- * [Steve Lemke on Collin Hansen and Provocation](#)
- * [Steve Lemke and Christian Scholarship](#)
- * [Tom Ascol's Response to Dr. Steve Lemke, Part 1](#)
- * [Tom Ascol's Response to Dr. Steve Lemke, Part 2](#)
- * [Tom Ascol's Response to Dr. Steve Lemke, Part 3](#)
- * [Steve Lemke's Letter and My Response](#) (by Tom Ascol)

4. [Steve Lemke on "Four Streams" of Calvinism, Part 2](#)

In [Part 1 of my response](#) to Dr. Steve Lemke's "four streams" of Calvinism, I addressed the unhelpful nature of labels and his misrepresentation of Founders Ministries. In Part 2, I want to briefly respond to the other three "streams" and show just how his definitions are superficial and stereotypical. Let's pick up with the second "stream."

2. "Together for the Gospel Calvinists"

"Together for the Gospel Calvinists tend to be well-trained theologically, and they give careful attention to Calvinism as a doctrinal system. This branch has a number of persons in key positions of convention leadership, especially in seminaries."

Lemke is right in saying that Together for the Gospel Calvinists are well-trained theologically, but to say they are the **only** stream that is well-trained is simply to create a false dichotomy between Baptist Calvinists. There is a great overlap between T4G and Founders as seen both in their conferences and the *Founders Journal*. Both enjoy fellowship with non-Baptists and agree in the soteriological framework of the Reformed tradition. Furthermore, there are many "Reformed Relevantants" that could also be included in this group. For instance, Mark Dever, one of the founding four of T4G [recently spoke](#) at an Acts 29 Boot Camp in Chicago. [Daniel Montgomery](#), a leading "Reformed Relevantant" and pastor of [Sojourn Church](#) in Louisville [recently spoke in SBTS chapel](#) (several professors and a large number of seminary students are members at Sojourn). Numerous other examples could be given, such as Lig Duncan and John Piper who both have affiliated themselves with Founders Ministries and C.J. Mahaney (and his successor Josh Harris) who are closely related to Mark Driscoll and the conservative wing of the emerging church movement. These examples but a small sampling to show how unhelpful Lemke's classifications are to the discussion of Baptist Calvinists.

I should mention, also, that there are more missionaries being sent out through SBTS than any other seminary in the SBC. By providence, I ending up sitting next to the International Mission Board (IMB) recruiter for SBTS on a connecting flight from Atlanta to Louisville earlier this year. I asked him about Calvinism and missions, and here is what he told me. He said that he

could extend his visit by an additional two weeks and still not get in all the interviews and appointments with students seeking to go on mission overseas. All of my roommates from college are “five-point Calvinists,” and all of them have attended seminary and currently on the mission field. Oh, and they are all very well-trained theologically too. 😊 It is possible to have a robust theology and also be missionally driven. The fact that there is a dichotomy between the two has served much of the problem of pragmatism ruling our practice, not a faithful expression of biblical revelation.

3. “Reformed Relevants”

“Reformed Relevants are less doctrinaire than Founder’s (sic) Movement Calvinists or Together for the Gospel Calvinists. They tend to be less loyal to the SBC as a denomination, and tend to accommodate some Presbyterian practices such as open drinking alcoholic beverages.”

Lemke is right about Reformed Relevants being less loyal to the SBC as a denomination. They know that we are living in a post-denominational world and connect through other, less-bureaucratic structures such as affinity-based networks. Speaking of networks, the leading organization of Reformed Relevants in the SBC is the [Acts 29 Network](#), where you will find several leading Southern Baptists, including [Darrin Patrick](#) (who is currently Vice-President), [Daniel Montgomery](#), [Ed Stetzer](#), and [J.D. Greear](#). To say that they are “less doctrinaire than Founders Ministries or Together for the Gospel” does injustice to [their statement of faith](#). Take a look at [their doctrinal statement](#), and you tell me if they are weak on theology.

Also, it should be noted that the last [National Founders Conference](#) had Ed Stetzer as their keynote speaker in a conference focused on church planting and revitalization. In addition, Founders board members and several leading “Reformed Relevants” have met together in the past and will continue to do so in the future (as seen in the upcoming A29 Lead Conference in St. Louis).

I do find it interesting, however, that Lemke brings beverage alcohol to the discussion as a means of trying to define “Reformed Relevant Calvinists.” That conversation I will leave for another day. 😊

4. “Irenic Calvinists”

“Irenic Calvinists are Calvinistic in their doctrine, especially regarding some aspects of Calvinistic soteriology, but they do not share a Calvinistic missiology. They do not make their Calvinism a major issue in their ministries, and they give conscious attention to the effectiveness of means in missions and evangelism.”

This last stream, I believe, is more of a commentary of non-Calvinists than an actual description of Baptist Calvinists. In fact, I would argue that it is a nondescript category better entitled as the “politically correct” Calvinists—the kind who are not supposed to discuss doctrine or *really* believe that they believe. It is perplexing to find a label for “Irenic Calvinists” as though those in the other categories do not fit into this category, especially in regards to focusing both on

doctrine (theology) and practice (mission). A truly balanced Calvinist will have both a healthy credenda and agenda and understand how the former fuels the latter.

According to Lemke, these Calvinists “do not share a Calvinistic missiology.” Now as to what he means by this, it is anyone’s guess. But if he is talking about the Calvinistic missiology of John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, Jesse Mercer, or Andrew Fuller, then such a Calvinistic missiology should be embraced by all streams of Calvinists and non-Calvinists alike. Has Lemke considered the [church planting](#) and [evangelistic enterprises](#) of John Calvin himself?

Having looked at these four “streams” by Lemke, it is hard to find how they are helpful in any regard. They are superficial and stereotypical at best. There comes a time when labeling is seen as nothing less than backyard name-calling. If you want to know who the Baptist Calvinists are, talk to them. If you want to know what they believe and how they live out their faith and practice, get to know them. Don’t buy into the arbitrary labels that don’t correspond to reality. Any one at any time can use a label as a power play in words to influence a reader to agree to their bias. I would only ask that there be an honest, objective assessment that attempts to give clarity, not confusion to the topic a hand.

Related Articles:

- * [Steve Lemke on “Four Streams” of Calvinism, Part 1](#)
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5. Steve Lemke on Total Depravity

Dr. Steve Lemke briefly gives his understanding of the doctrines of grace, otherwise known as the five points of Calvinism, and follows it up with what he calls “a helpful alternative” and “a softer version” in Dr. Timothy George’s acronym of ROSES. In the following posts, I will interact with Lemke’s understanding of the five points and follow up with his take on George’s ROSES.

Of the five points, Lemke places the greatest emphasis on total depravity. I do find this helpful because it is an appropriate starting point (only after having addressed the monergistic and theocentric marrow of Calvinism). One of the first critiques I made of Dr. James Leo Garrett in [his six-article presentation of “Dortian Calvinism”](#) is that [he devoted little to no attention](#) to the doctrine of total depravity. So I am glad to see that Lemke has taken up this important doctrine, although I disagree with his understanding of it.

In his description of TULIP, Lemke writes the following on total depravity:

“Understood in the fully Calvinist sense, ‘total depravity’ means that infants are born with original sin, and are thus ‘dead’ spiritually (Eph. 2:1-3), and utterly incapable of responding to God without God’s election.”

In fairness, Lemke is not giving a detailed description of total depravity, but even in this one sentence summary, there are several errors in his presentation of the Calvinistic understanding of total depravity. The fact that infants are born with [original] sin is not held only by Calvinists. Indeed, human inability as a result of sin has been believed by both Arminians and Calvinists. Responding to God was not directly related to “God’s election” as much as how they understood the nature of God’s grace (saving and efficacious for Calvinists and enabling and prevenient [or persuasive] for Arminians). In Article III of the Remonstrance (the Arminian declaration), it states:

That man has not saving grace of himself, nor of the energy of his free-will, inasmuch as he, in the state of apostasy and sin, can of and by himself neither think, will, nor do anything that is truly good (such as having faith eminently is); but that it is needful that he be born again of God in Christ, through his Holy Spirit, and renewed in understanding, inclination, or will, and all his powers, in order that he may rightly understand, think, will, and effect what is truly good, according to the word of Christ, John xv. 5: “Without me ye can do nothing.” (emphasis mine)

Those who do not believe in human inability have been known as [semi-Pelagian](#) (which eventually was condemned as heresy in the 2nd Council of Orange in 529 AD). It is hard to see how this is not what Lemke is arguing not only for himself but also for “most Baptists.” He argues that the language for deadness should be balanced by the metaphor of “aliens and strangers” which shows that *they are alive* and merely “do not have the proper relationship as citizens in the Kingdom.” In other words, the problem is not that humans are born dead in sin and morally incapable of responding to God on their own; the problem is simply that they are not properly related to the Kingdom. Now whether “most Baptists” feel comfortable with Lemke representing their theology that is so close to historically-deemed heresy is something they ought to, in my opinion, be concerned about. Nevertheless, it is clear that he wants to distance himself from a belief in original sin. Again, Lemke writes:

*“We usually affirm total depravity, though often not in the same sense as Dortian Calvinism. Virtually all Baptists would affirm universal human sinfulness (apart from Christ) and the moral and spiritual depravity of **all persons over the age of accountability**. But while affirming the sinfulness of all mankind, most Baptists usually see **some role for human response or ‘point of addressability,’** as suggested in Romans 1 and 2.” (emphasis mine)*

Lemke is arguing that the difference between “Dortian Calvinism” and “virtually all Baptists” is that while Calvinists argue that sinful corruption is from birth, Baptists affirm “moral and spiritual depravity of all persons *over the age of accountability*.” The assumption is taken, then, that Baptists do not affirm moral and spiritual depravity of humans from birth; only those who have reached the age of accountability become morally and spiritually depraved. Until then, it must be assumed that an infant or child is a sort-of [tabula rasa, or blank slate](#), living before God as morally neutral or innocent. John L. Dagg, the first Southern Baptist writing theologian, disagrees. Dagg writes,

“Depravity is natural to man; it is born with him, and not acquired in the progress of life. It is not to be ascribed to evil habit, or evil exercise” (Manual of Theology, 153).

The key phrase is that depravity is “not acquired in the progress of life”—in other words to say that depravity is not a sinful nature you attain by actual transgressions. Instead, it is a manifestation of a corrupt and sinful nature “born with him.” James P. Boyce agrees with Dagg as he adds:

“The facts as to the descendants of Adam show that they have universally partaken of his corrupted nature, and that, not even in their earliest years, have any had the innocent nature, with its strong proclivities to holiness, which constituted his original condition. They are born with the corrupted nature which he acquired, together with all the other evils set forth as the penalties of his sin. . . . The Scriptures plainly assume and declare that God righteously punishes all men, not only for what they do, but for what they are” (Abstract of Theology, 249).

Boyce explains that “not even in their earliest years” did anyone have an innocent nature. Rather, they have a corrupted nature—one that is punishable not only because of actual transgressions (what they do) but for living in a condemnable state (what they are). It is evident that our Baptist forefathers believed in original sin, a corrupt nature, and moral inability. They knew that Scripture identifies sinners as “by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3), that the wicked “are estranged from the womb and go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies” (Psalm 58:3). Indeed, they knew that sinners were “shaped in iniquity” and “conceived in sin” (Psalm 51:5). The Second London Baptist Confession (1689), on the fall of man and punishment of sin, states the following:

*They being the root, and by God’s appointment, standing in the room and stead of all mankind, **the guilt of the sin was imputed, and corrupted nature conveyed**, to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation, being **now conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath**, the servants of sin, the subjects of death, and all other miseries, spiritual, temporal, and eternal, unless the Lord Jesus set them free. (Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:21, 22, 45, 49; Psalms 51:5; Job 14:4; Ephesians 2:3; Romans 6:20 Romans 5:12; Hebrews 2:14, 15; 1 Thessalonians 1:10) - emphasis mine ([source](#))*

The first Southern Baptist confession, the Abstract of Principles (1858), is a concise (abstract) of the 1689 LBC, and on the Fall of man, it states:

*“God originally created man in His own image, and free from sin; but, through the temptation of Satan, he transgressed the command of God, and fell from his original holiness and righteousness; whereby **his posterity inherit a nature corrupt** and wholly opposed to God and His law, are **under condemnation**, and as soon as they are capable of moral action, become actual transgressors.” - emphasis mine ([source](#))*

There is consensus both by individual theologians and confessions in our Baptist history that stand in stark disagreement with Lemke on the nature of sinful man. The problem that Lemke seems to be having is twofold: (1) the idea that total depravity eliminates human responsibility

and (2) that Calvinists believe in the total loss of the image of God. On the former, Lemke writes,

“[I]f one takes being ‘dead in trespasses and sins’ literally, i.e., if ‘dead means dead,’ then one can neither accept or reject Christ. Dead people cannot accept, but on the other hand, neither can they reject, either!”

Going back to his original description of total depravity, Lemke explains that spiritual deadness disallows human response. Calvinists do believe that human beings are beneficiaries of God’s common grace and recipients of general revelation. However neither this grace nor revelation is regarded as salvific. The “point of addressability” refers to man being without excuse both as a result of general revelation (knowledge of God to all people everywhere ongoingly) as seen in creation (outwardly, Rom. 1) and conscience (inwardly, Rom. 2). There is no indication in Romans 1 and 2 that people respond positively to God’s revelation. They certainly respond freely, but only according to their nature which is inherently sinful. A sinner with a corrupt nature will continually choose according to his affections and inclinations—all of which apart from the gracious operation of God’s Spirit, will be outward acts of an inward rebellion against God.

I call on Dagg and Boyce again to testify. Dagg writes:

*“Moral depravity shows itself in outward acts of transgression; but, atrocious as these often are, it is **chiefly in the heart** that God beholds and hates it”* (Manual of Theology, 152, emphasis mine).

“Every agent is responsible for himself. . . . Human courts do not excuse culprits, because of the corrupting influences which have led them to violate the law. The law takes direct cognizance of the agent and his deed. This accords with common sense of mankind. So divine justice condemns him, however he may have become wicked, and whoever else may be to blame for his being so” (ibid., 159).

Boyce shares a little more about human responsibility and the freedom of the will.

*“This corruption (of nature) does not destroy accountability or responsibility for present sins. The Scriptures universally recognize man’s liability to punishment for all the **thoughts** of his mind, and the **desires** of his heart, or the **emotions** of his physical nature, as well as for his **acts**. . . . This corruption does not destroy the freedom of the will. This is the ground upon which men are held responsible by God and by human law and conscience. The condition of man is indeed such ‘that he cannot not sin’ but **this is due to his nature**, which loves sin and hates holiness, and which prefers self to God. **When man sins, he does so of his own choice, freely, without compulsion**”* (Abstract of Principles, 244-45, emphasis mine).

Spiritual people, indeed, reject God and will be held accountable for their willful rejection. This rejection is a reflection of a sinful nature in need of regeneration. Apart from this divine work of the Holy Spirit, the thoughts, affections, and choices will be positively inclined towards sin, having become slaves to it; but at no point is anyone *not* choosing according to their own free

will. It is just that their will is in bondage to sin as Scripture speaks of the “fleshly nature” [Rom. 8] or “natural man” [1 Cor. 2].

Shortly, I will address Lemke’s re-wording of George’s presentation of ROSES, but for the time being, one more quote needs to be highlighted to reveal his second problem with total depravity. In his description of George on the “R” which stands for radical depravity, Lemke writes:

“Compared with total depravity, radical depravity agrees that every aspect of our being was damaged through the Fall and we can do nothing to save ourselves, but affirms that humans are not totally evil because we retain the image of God despite our fallenness.”

No Calvinist believes that the image of God is totally lost, as Lemke implies. Where is Lemke getting these ideas? A total loss of the image of God would cease to be human. Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology* explains how the image of God is distorted but not lost by the Fall:

“[S]ince man has sinned, he is certainly not as fully like God as he was before. His moral purity has been lost and his sinful character certainly does not reflect God’s holiness. His intellect is corrupted by falsehood and misunderstanding; his speech no longer continually glorifies God; his relationships are often governed by selfishness rather than love, and so forth. Though man is still in the image of God, in every aspect of life some parts of this image has been distorted or lost” (444, emphasis original).

A firm belief in total depravity cannot be equated with any idea of total loss of the *imago dei*. The Fall was devastating, no doubt, bringing natural and spiritual death. But had the Fall resulted in the total loss of being made in God’s image, we would all be annihilated, not corrupted. Anthony Hoekema, in his excellent treatment on the subject, *Created in God’s Image*, argues,

“After man’s fall into sin, the image of God was not annihilated but perverted. The image in its structural sense was still there—man’s gifts, endowments, and capacities were not destroyed by the Fall—but man now began to use these gifts in ways that were contrary to God’s will” (83).

Overall, let me conclude this part of my response to Dr. Lemke by saying this. The burden of proof regarding the total depravity of man lies not at the feet of Calvinists, but in the biblically untenable and historically dangerous position Lemke has advocated. If Dagg is right (and I believe he is) that moral depravity is chiefly expressed in the heart—a heart that is deceitfully wicked above all things (Jer. 17:9)—then how can one say that condemnation only arises when one graduates to the age of accountability? If God knows our thoughts and intentions from afar, if he knows what is in the heart of a man, then by way means will we be able to satisfy the wrath of a holy God? Boyce argued that “condemnation can only be removed by proof of innocence” (246), and the burden of proof is to show the innocence and inculpability of man in light of what God has revealed in His Word. I will let Dagg have the last word:

“Whatever our reasonings may be on the subject, it is fully ascertained to be the will of God, before an individual is born into the world, that, when born, he shall be in the condition in which the curse left the father of the race. The Bible, and the voice of Nature, speak alike on this point;

and if our reasonings say that the Author of Nature and the Bible has done wrong, we should suspect that we have erred in our inferences, or in the premises from which they are drawn” (162-63).

Related Articles:

- * [Steve Lemke on “Four Streams” of Calvinism, Part 2](#)
- * [Steve Lemke on “Four Streams” of Calvinism, Part 1](#)
- * [Steve Lemke on Collin Hansen and Provocation](#)
- * [Steve Lemke and Christian Scholarship](#)
- * [The Alabama Baptist and Dortian Calvinism: Response 1](#)

6. Steve Lemke on TULIP

Since I addressed the T in TULIP in greater detail [in my previous post](#), I will begin with the U of Unconditional election. While each point of TULIP as addressed by Lemke could (and probably should) be addressed in separate posts, I will am pursuing brevity for the benefit of the reader and should in no wise be taken as a concession for Lemke’s errors.

Unconditional Election

On Unconditional Election, Lemke writes:

“Many Calvinists understand ‘unconditional election’ to mean that salvation is provided by God without any involvement or free choice on the party of the sinner, counting any human response (even assent) as a work.”

Absolutely false. Who are the “many Calvinists” Lemke is referring to who contend that unconditional election removes human responsibility? Perhaps he is referring to [hyper-Calvinists](#) who reject “duty faith.” Maybe by “free choice of the party of the sinner” he is allowing only for *libertarian free will* which we find later in his article he advocates. If that is the case, then yes, Calvinists do not allow for this kind of free will. This is because *the Bible* does not allow for libertarian free will (if you will notice in his paper, there are no Scriptural proofs for his arguments). LFW cannot function with unconditional election, predestination, and divine foreknowledge, and the “power of contrary choice” ultimately makes the human decision the terminal cause in a most arbitrary sense.

Lemke also writes,

“Unconditional election is largely affirmed by Baptists, in the sense that all Baptists agree that salvation is by grace through faith, not by works. But while Baptists believe that salvation is wholly from God, they also believe that in the economy of God’s salvation He has chosen for human response to be prerequisite for actualizing salvation.”

If salvation is wholly of God, then why would God leaves the “actualizing of salvation” in the hands of depraved sinners? How does this align, for instance, with Romans 8:30 which says,

“And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified”? The predestining, calling, justifying, and glorifying are all done by God and in the past tense. How can man “actualize” something which is attributed solely to God? If many were left to himself to “actualize” salvation, then there would be no need for a Trinitarian understanding of salvation where God the Father chooses according to the purpose of His own will, God the Son accomplishes redemption for His Father’s glory, and God the Spirit applies (appropriates) the benefits of Christ’s saving work through regeneration, effectual calling, and adoption. Furthermore, if sinners who have not experienced the new covenant promise of receiving a new heart and nature can actualize salvation on their own, how can it truly be said that salvation is by grace alone? Humans respond to God only because they are freed to do so by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and they come because they are effectually called by God. *That’s* the prerequisite to “actualizing salvation.” To argue that God has chosen human response as a prerequisite is to say that God has left salvation in the hands of men and credit it to their doing. Do we find this *anywhere* in the Bible?

Limited Atonement

On Limited Atonement, Lemke writes:

“Double predestination requires that God foreordains some to heaven and some to hell. So when Jesus died on the cross, He died only for the elect, not for all the sins of the world.”

Double predestination comes up a lot, often to argue that a belief in it is “hyper-Calvinism.” But rarely do you have anyone *actually explain* what they mean by double predestination. The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, on God’s decrees, says the following:

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated, or foreordained to eternal life through Jesus Christ, to the praise of his glorious grace; others being left to act in their sin to their just condemnation, to the praise of his glorious justice.

Lemke leads you to believe that “double predestination” *requires* you to believe that God foreordains some to hell. But what does the confession say? Some are foreordained to eternal life through Jesus Christ, and *others (are) left in their sin to their just condemnation*. Lemke wrongly says that God effectively works unbelief in the hearts of reprobates so as to foreordain their condemnation. Double-predestination is asymmetrical with unequal ultimacy where God positively works faith in a believer through regeneration and negatively passes over the reprobate, leaving him in his just condemnation (for Scriptures on reprobation, see Prov. 16:4; Matt. 11:25; 13:10-15; John 3:36; 6:64-66; 9:39; Rom. 1:18-28; 9:11-13; 9:18-24; 11:7-10; 2 Thess. 1:8-9; 2:11-12; 1 Pet. 2:7-8; Jude 4; Rev. 13:8; 17:8).

But aside from double predestination, there is something else, something more poignant, that needs to be discussed regarding particular redemption, and that is personal substitution. If Lemke believes that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of all people, as a substitute for those who believe as well as for those who do not believe, then the issues of the efficacy of Christ’s work is in question. Christ died their death, but they will not live. Their sins are forgiven, but they do not have eternal life. In what sense, then, does the substitutionary death of Christ benefit

the non-elect? Non-Calvinists will argue that Jesus' death purchased the possibility that all could be saved, but purchasing a plan and purchasing a people are two separate things. So then, we can only conclude that non-Calvinists limit the atonement in the sense that Jesus' death did not actually accomplish the saving of any particular people but only made it possible for them to be saved. The efficacy of their salvation is not in the atoning blood of Christ but in the freedom of choice where by anyone can choose Christ. Calvinists believe in particular redemption, that particular individuals were substituted for on the cross. Non-Calvinists believe in universal redemption, though limited because not everyone will be saved. The former explains the limitation because of God's infinite purpose; the latter explains limitation because of man's free will. Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists believe in limited atonement. The question is, then, which view does the Bible support?

Lemke says that limited atonement "is the least scriptural of the five affirmations." I know that the John 3:16 conference is coming up, so let me give some references in the gospel of John: John 10:11, 14, 26-28; 11:52; 13:1; 17:2, 6, 9, 11, 12, 24; 18:9. To say that limited atonement is "the least scriptural" of the five affirmations must be a tacit admission that the other four affirmations are replete with Scriptural support.

Irresistible Grace

On Irresistible Grace, Lemke writes:

"Because all of salvation is from God, the Calvinist system requires irresistible grace—that God would even violate human freewill by forcing persons to believe in Him against their sinful wills, for these human wills are incapable of responding to God affirmatively apart from His enabling grace."

Of all the affirmations, Lemke misses it the most on irresistible grace. This should be quite troubling to Southern Baptists, especially given the fact that he has been appointed to speak on irresistible grace at the upcoming John 3:16 conference. "The Calvinist system" (notice the terminology) does not "require" that God would violate human freewill by forcing persons to believe! Nowhere do you find this being supported by Calvinists! Good grief, there are literally dozens of source I could quote to refute Lemke on this, but allow me to (again) simply use the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith. On effectual calling, it says,

*This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, nor from any power or agency in the creature, being wholly passive therein, being dead in sins and trespasses, until being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit; he is thereby **enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it, and that by no less power than that which raised up Christ from the dead.** - emphasis mine*

On the section of free will, it also says:

*When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin, and by his grace alone enables him **freely to will and to do that***

which is spiritually good; yet so as that by reason of his remaining corruptions, he doth not perfectly, nor only will, that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.- emphasis mine

Does it get any more plain than that? For the record, here is what Calvinists believe about irresistible grace (or effectual calling) as described by the 1689LBC:

*Those whom God hath predestinated unto life, he is pleased in his appointed, and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ; **enlightening their minds** spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and **giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills**, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good, and **effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ**; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace. - emphasis mine*

Our thoughts, affections, and wills are changed as a result of regeneration. The darkened mind apprehends the truths of Scripture, the hardened heart wants to know Christ, and the enabled will freely (made willing by His grace) responds in faith and repentance.

The alternative view, which Lemke does not mention, is prevenient grace (as held in the Arminian tradition). Given that he does not provide an alternative, one is left to question how God's grace operates, if at all, in the salvation of a sinner. Does God enable sinners, cooperating with him in a synergistic fashion? Does God leave it to the sinner to "actualize" his own salvation and somehow show it is all by God's grace? This all goes back to how you understand the state of fallen man. If he is dead in sin, he needs to be made alive. If the Fall has not totally affected his ability but merely needs prevenient grace to overcome the effects of the Fall, and that faith and repentance are inherently human-resourced and not gifts of God, then you would fall into the Arminian camp. But this is problem when non-Calvinists in the SBC often times call themselves "Biblicists." They don't put their soteriological cards on the table to positively affirm what they believe but instead have conferences attempting to refute others with whom they disagree.

Perseverance of the Saints

On Perseverance of the Saints, Lemke writes:

"All Southern Baptist confessions affirm the security of the believer—once someone is genuinely saved by God, they are saved for all eternity. some Augustinians and Calvinists do seem to open the door for perseverance to be by works after justification has come by grace through faith."

When Baptists call themselves "one-point Calvinists," this is usually the point they affirm. Lemke asserts that "all Southern Baptists . . . affirm perseverance of the saints." Yet, non-Calvinists who believe in "eternal security" and Calvinists who "believe in the perseverance of the saints" don't necessary believe the same thing. For instance, Charles Stanley, one of the keynote speakers at the John 3:16 conference holds to a "once saved, always saved" view of eternal security which does not require perseverance in the faith. In fact, it can be argued that

Stanley teaches that a person can be saved in spite of their lifelong disobedience, (which would be antinomianism) having previously professed Christ at one point in their life, they are safe.

Lemke seems to argue that Calvinists “open the door for perseverance to be by works.” No. Perseverance is the outworking of the gospel-believing sinner whose God is at work both to will and to do according to His own good pleasure. Calvinists believe that one cannot be eternally secure apart from experiencing the ongoing Trinitarian work of salvation (we have been saved, we are being saved, and we will be saved). Is it not interesting that non-Calvinists place such an emphasis on human responsibility and the will in conversion but minimize it in sanctification? How can you biblically argue that your will is of greater use prior to conversion than after having been regenerated by the Holy Spirit?

“Once saved, always saved” and “perseverance of the saints” are not the same thing. If you are genuinely converted, if the God who raises the dead lives in you, you will persevere to the end. That does not mean you will never struggle or have dark times in your spiritual life, but it does mean that the God who saves you will keep you and will perfect you until you are in glory. Too much false sense of security is given because people have walked down an aisle, prayed a prayer, been baptized as a child, or had an emotional experience. We need to consider eternal security in light of the gospel and God’s work in our lives from beginning to end. Non-Calvinists who argue that one can profess Christ and be eternally secure apart from any outward manifestation of regeneration or ongoing work of sanctification have much to answer in regards to the stewardship of souls and handling of Scripture.

In my next post, I will address Lemke’s re-wording of Timothy George’s ROSES.

Related Articles:

- * [Steve Lemke on Total Depravity](#)
- * [Steve Lemke on “Four Streams” of Calvinism, Part 2](#)
- * [Steve Lemke on “Four Streams” of Calvinism, Part 1](#)
- * [Steve Lemke on Collin Hansen and Provocation](#)
- * [Steve Lemke and Christian Scholarship](#)

7. Steve Lemke on Timothy George and ROSES

Steve Lemke has a section of his paper cleverly entitled “Flower Power” wherein he explains, to his satisfaction, the difference between the “hard version” of TULIP and the softer, more acceptable version of ROSES as presented by Dr. Timothy George. [In my previous post](#), I addressed Lemke’s caricature of the doctrines of grace (other than getting the acronym correct, it is hard to see where he accurately stated the doctrinal affirmations of any of the five points). From there, Lemke proceeds to make the argument that Timothy George’s ROSES is a “softer form of Calvinism” and a “helpful alternative to the ‘TULIP’ acronym.” It is his contention that ROSES is an intentional “moving away” from the “harder Calvinism represented in the TULIP.”

But is this a valid distinction by Lemke? Is ROSES really a “move away” from TULIP? Lemke leads the reader to believe that ROSES represents substantive differences in the soteriological affirmations of the doctrines of grace. Not only are there no substantive differences between

ROSES and TULIP, I argue that Lemke misrepresents (again) TULIP and couches George's ROSES in light of his own doctrinal convictions (eisegesis). To support my argument, I will quote George directly from his book, *Amazing Grace: God's Initiative-Our Response* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2000), and I will also quote Lemke directly from his article.

R - Radical Depravity

Timothy George:

"We are born rebels inheriting a corrupted nature from our parents and growing up in an environment tainted by sin. . . . Sin is a universal deformity of human nature and it places men and women everywhere under the certain reign of death and the inescapable wrath of God (see Rom. 3:9-20; Eph. 2:1-3)" (72).

Steve Lemke:

"Compared with total depravity, radical depravity agrees that every aspect of our being was damaged through the Fall and we can do nothing to save ourselves, but affirms that humans are not totally evil because we retain the image of God despite our fallenness."

On the state of man, Lemke and George stand in direct disagreement. George argues that we are born with a corrupted nature and spiritually dead. Lemke argues that man is *not* born corrupted in nature and is *not* spiritually dead. George has presented nothing different than what Calvinists who hold to in affirming total depravity.

George writes,

"The real question raised by the doctrine of radical depravity is how pathetic fallen human beings are apart from grace. Are they merely sick, morally weak, or are they spiritually dead? The Bible says the latter in Ephesians 2:1-2 . . . This is why the Bible describes becoming a Christian as a resurrection, a rising to new life" (73).

Lemke writes,

"[I]f one takes being 'dead in trespasses and sins' literally, i.e., if 'dead means dead,' then one can neither accept or reject Christ. Dead people cannot accept, but on the other hand, neither can they reject, either! . . . The language of spiritual deadness . . . should be balanced by the alien and strangers metaphor (Eph. 2:11-22). Aliens are alive; they simply do not have the proper relationship as citizens in the Kingdom."

Could the contrast be any more clear? The argument that Calvinists holding to TULIP believe in a total loss of the image of God [is patently false](#) and an irresponsible insertion by Lemke. On point one, there is nothing softer nor could it be considered alternative viewpoint to TULIP.

O - Overcoming Grace

Timothy George:

“The term ‘irresistible grace’ is misleading because it seems to suggest that sinners are drawn to God in a mechanical, impersonal way, as a piece of metal is to a magnet” (74).

“Another term for overcoming grace is effectual calling. It means simply that God is able to accomplish what He has determined to do in the salvation of lost men and women” (ibid.).

Steve Lemke:

“Compared with irresistible grace, overcoming grace (or effectual calling) affirms that God accomplishes salvation, but differs in that rather than salvation being a mechanical and deterministic process, it allows for even sinful, obstinate humans to respond to God’s persistent wooing.”

On the first quote, George provides his reasoning for his term “overcoming grace.” His issue is with *the term* “irresistible grace” because it *can* be misleading. In the second quote, George positively affirms the Calvinistic understanding of irresistible grace (or [effectual calling](#)). To clarify, IG does not mean that sinners can resist or strive against God’s drawing; what it means is that among those whom God has chosen, His grace will triumph over their resistance and cause them to come, not against their will, but by changing their will (Calvinists hold to a freedom of inclination, i.e., compatibilism, while non-Calvinists hold to power of contrary choice, i.e., libertarianism).

The idea that Calvinists believe in a view of salvation where it is a “mechanical and deterministic process” is yet another caricature. It is the very thing that George was concerned about the misleading nature of the term (as Lemke apparently has been misled). So on point two, while George offers alternative terminology, he agrees in substance with TULIP. Nothing “softer,” no alternative.

S - Sovereign Election

Timothy George:

“Election is unconditional in the sense that it is not based upon our decision for God, but rather God’s decision for us” (75).

George quotes J.I. Packer in an affirmative manner, who said:

“Before Creation God selected out of the human race, foreseen as fallen, those whom he would redeem, bring to faith, justify, and glorify in and through Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28-39; Eph. 1:3-14; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; 2 Tim. 1:9-10). This divine choice is an expression of free and sovereign grace, for it is unconstrained and unconditional, not merited by anything in those who are its subjects”

Steve Lemke:

“In contrast to the double predestinarianism of unconditional election, God sovereignly elects those whom He foreknows will respond to Him.”

Lemke’s most blatant error can be found in his treatment of George on sovereign election. Lemke argues that George’s position on election is based on foreseen faith (“God sovereignly elects those whom He foreknows will respond to Him”). This would make George a classical Arminian! ([see article 1 on the Remonstrance](#)) The only foreseen language in George’s ROSES is found in the quote by Packer who says that God considers the elect “foreseen as fallen”—a distinction between [infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism](#), not a change in the nature of God’s election! Precisely because God “foresees us as fallen,” i.e., spiritually dead, we are saved by God’s free choice, not our free choice. God foresees our depravity, not our faith, and therefore takes the initiative in His unconditional love to save a people for Himself—a work of salvation attributed entirely to the Lord.

The phrase, “those whom He foreknows will respond to Him”, is an eisegetical insertion of Lemke’s own convictions that reveals his inability to separate his bias from George’s position on sovereign election. The only issue that George addresses negatively is, again, the potentially misleading terminology of the adjective *unconditional*, but notice that George takes issue with the term and not its meaning. Despite the theological spin, it is clear that George is not advocating election based on foreseen faith (conditional election) but rather is remaining consistent with the Reformed affirmation of unconditional election.

E - Eternal Life

Timothy George:

“To persevere is to persist, to continue, to be steadfast and unrelenting in purpose. . . . The Bible . . . attributes the fact that believers continue to abide in Christ to the keeping power of God” (78).

Again, George writes,

“Anyone who can sin blithely, flagrantly, flippantly with no sense of uneasiness, no qualms of conscience, is most likely a person who has never been genuinely born again in the first place” (79).

Steve Lemke:

“The phrase ‘perseverance of the saints’ might suggest that although we are saved by grace, we are kept by our good works. The phrase ‘Once saved, always saved’ could suggest that we could claim Christ as Savior without making Him Lord of our lives. George prefers eternal life or eternal security to convey the scriptural truth of the assurance of the believer.”

George clearly affirms the perseverance of the saints, not as necessary to our salvation, but as rightly understood in the Calvinistic tradition, where God secures the end by providing the means (in Himself). We persevere by grace—the same grace that saved us. There *will* be perseverance in a believer precisely because God is committed to keeping, perfecting, and glorifying His children who belong to Him. The assurance of the believer does not come from tokens like praying a prayer or immediate pronouncements by a zealous evangelist. Assurance comes from the inward testimony of the Spirit and outward evidence of obedience whereby the distinguishing marks of grace reveal a believing sinner to be “making his calling and election *sure*” (2 Pet. 1:10). With one point to go, George’s acronym has changed nothing in substance to TULIP; only potentially misleading terminology.

S - Singular Redemption

~~Lemke rightly represents George’s Arminian position in that he argues “that Jesus’ death was sufficient to save everyone but is efficient only for those who repent and believe.”~~ I stand corrected: George’s view on the atonement is indeed Dortian. [Second Head, Article Three](#) states:

The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, and is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world.
(emphasis mine)

Therefore, it cannot be said that George’s position on the atonement is any different from the Dortian affirmation regarding the atonement (my oversight). As George explains, “the Reformed position is better described as *definite atonement* or *singular redemption*” (81).

On none of the five points does George advocate an Arminian position, though Lemke tries, especially on election, to make it so. George’s presentation of ROSES is thoroughly consistent with the Canons of Dort (TULIP). Creative imagination is required to argue that George is trying to offer an alternative or “softer version” of TULIP; if anything, he wants to use terms that are not as potentially misleading while at the same time holding true to the affirmations of Reformed soteriology. Lemke wants you to believe that he stopped to smell the ROSES - that the ROSES he picks have no thorns.

You know, and I know, he could not be farther from the truth.

Related Articles:

- * [Steve Lemke on TULIP](#)
- * [Steve Lemke on Total Depravity](#)
- * [Steve Lemke on “Four Streams” of Calvinism, Part 2](#)
- * [Steve Lemke on “Four Streams” of Calvinism, Part 1](#)
- * [Steve Lemke on Collin Hansen and Provocation](#)
- * [Steve Lemke and Christian Scholarship](#)

[8. Steve Lemke on Bethlehem Baptist Church, Baptism, and Church Membership](#)

Steve Lemke is not a fan of Together for the Gospel. The second half of his article is entitled, “Baptists and Presbyterians Not Together: Nine Marks Which Separate Baptists from Presbyterians,” where Lemke lays out his argument for Baptist separation (or, as I would argue, isolation). Interestingly enough, his first two marks are “soul competency” and “age of accountability”—not exactly bedrock doctrines of the Baptist tradition. In any case, he proceeds from there to believer’s baptism (mark 3) and baptism by immersion (mark 4). In the fourth mark, we find yet another major error in Lemke’s presentation—this time it is [Bethlehem Baptist Church](#)’s position on baptism and church membership.

In the pertinent portion of Lemke’s commentary, he writes:

“Piper’s proposed statement did not find general agreement among the church’s elders, and the issue was discussed for several years. An amended policy was finally enacted in August 2005. Although expressing preference for baptism by immersion, the amended membership statement expressed the desire ‘not to elevate beliefs and practices that are nonessential to the level of prerequisites for church membership.’ Thus, according to the new policy, ‘Christians who have not been baptized by immersion as believers, but, as they believe, by some other method or before they believed, may under some circumstances be members of this church.’”

Now, for those of you who can remember back in 2005, the debate over baptism and church membership was no private matter. Documents were made public, and the discussion was one of the most heated in the blogosphere. I recall in particular one church’s elder body, Clifton Baptist Church, writing a letter to the elders of BBC encouraging them to reconsider the proposed amendment by the elders.

When I first read this portion regarding BBC, I was sitting in the Atlanta airport in amazement at how such an important matter could be so poorly handled. Not only is Lemke bearing false witness to BBC, he is doing it in order to justify the following statement, which is his conclusion in light of BBC:

“The danger of compromising doctrinal convictions in order to be tolerant or in the interest of ecumenical unity is that the call for one compromise after another never ends. Once one starts down the path of compromising one’s own biblical convictions, it is difficult to hold to any doctrine uncompromisingly.”

Here’s the truth about BBC. The proposed amendment was “tabled”—in other words, **it was withdrawn**. This information has been available on the internet for years ([here](#) and [here](#) for example). On BBC’s own website, [they explain that the motion was withdrawn](#) on December 18, 2005, and that their affirmation of faith states the following:

“We believe in the local church, consisting of a company of believers in Jesus Christ, baptized on a credible profession of faith, and associated for worship, work, and fellowship.”

A year later (December 4, 2006), John Piper addressed it again [in a radio interview](#) on Desiring God Radio. Piper said:

“We withdrew it, so everybody who is listening to this should understand that it did not happen. The proposal did not happen. We are still where we were; nobody can join Bethlehem who is not baptized by immersion, and indeed, who does not affirm that is the right way to do it.”

While in the Atlanta airport, I called a good friend who is on staff at BBC to get an update on the motion. I was informed that their position on baptism and church membership has not changed, and if Presbyterian attenders are seeking membership at BBC, they are required to be baptized by immersion.

Lemke did not do his homework. He wrongly stated that “an amended policy was enacted in August 2005” when it was not. He stated that there was an “amended membership statement” when the motion was not even brought to a vote. He stated that elders’ proposal was “a new policy” when in fact there is no new policy. Lemke bears false witness in order to charge John Piper and the elders of BBC of compromising doctrinal convictions. I do not see how this kind of accusation based on misinformation can be tolerated in any credible, scholarly journal.

I have compiled the articles from Desiring God’s website for you below. There is a movement today going on in the name of “Baptist Identity” to malign any evangelical unity around doctrinal essentials as “ecumenical compromise” (as Paige Patterson has expressed). The greater problem today is not between Southern Baptists and Evangelicals but between fellow Southern Baptists. While Baptists and Presbyterians may not be together on the ordinance of baptism, at least they are together for the gospel. There are marks which separate Baptists between Presbyterians, but as we see in Lemke’s article, there are probably just as many marks which separate Southern Baptists from one another. Therein lies the greater problem.

Bethlehem Baptist Church Articles:

- * [The Meaning of Membership and Church Accountability](#) by BBC Staff (Feb. 1, 2001)
- * [Baptism and Church Membership: Eight Recommendations for Constitutional Revision](#) by John Piper (Aug. 9, 2005)
- * [Baptism and Church Membership: The Recommendation from the Elders for Amending Bethlehem’s Constitution](#) by John Piper (Sept. 14, 2005)
- * [More Clarifications on the Baptism and Membership Issue](#) by John Piper (Oct. 12, 2005)
- * [Baptism and Church Membership: Questions and Answers](#) by John Piper (Oct. 31, 2005)
- * [Baptism and Church Membership: Dissenting Paper from Paul Dreblow \(1\)](#) (Nov. 10, 2005)
- * [Baptism and Church Membership: Dissenting Paper from Paul Dreblow \(2\)](#) (Nov. 10, 2005)
- * [Can You Update Us on the Baptism and Church Membership Issue from 2005?](#) by John Piper (Dec. 4, 2006)
- * [Response to Grudem on Baptism and Church Membership](#) by John Piper (Aug. 9, 2007)

9. Lemke's Remarks and My Response Regarding Bethlehem Baptist Church

In the comments of [my previous post](#), Dr. Steve Lemke [has responded](#) to my comments regarding the factual errors in his journal article. I was going to leave my response in the comments but at the conclusion felt that it was better to write a follow-up post here. I will not reproduce Lemke's comment here, although I will post some quotes from his comment. My response is as follows:

Dr. Lemke,

I assume that, despite all the qualifications, you are offering a retraction on what you have written about Bethlehem Baptist Church. If my assumption is right, then your bearing false witness against Piper and BBC has secondary implications—your charge of theological compromise. The only right thing to do in a retraction is not only to correct the factual errors but also retract your falsely derived conclusion as well.

You said,

By the way, I do think you misunderstood what I was saying, although my statement could have been clearer. I was not saying that the CHURCH approved the motion, but that the ELDERS had adopted it.

Elder approval of a motion and a policy enacted by the congregation is not the same thing, at least in Baptist polity. To say that “an amended policy was **finally enacted** in 2005 is simply not true, even with your argumentation (in the same paragraph you call it “**the new policy**”). BBC holds to Baptist polity with congregational rule while being led by plurality of elders. Simply because the elders approved a motion does not mean it was a policy in the church, as Piper and the documents clearly explain. Having done a paper on the differences of Baptists and Presbyterians, you should know this.

The fact is that there were numerous ways which you could have contacted BBC, not the least of which is actually calling them (Sam Crabtree is the staff person you would want to talk to). The information is clear as day [on their church website](#), and [any search engine](#) would get you in the information within 30 minutes of searching. The other site I referenced indeed was a blog—one that happens to be the most informative and reliable source of information on the internet. Because [it is a blog](#), it is any less credible? “Not an internet site but a blog . . .” - what's your point Steve?

Because the issue is not resolved does not mean that the church or elders are in active deliberation about this matter. You argue that this paper was presented in February of 2007. That was **over a year** after the motion was withdrawn and **a year and a half** before it was

published in the journal article. As an editor, is it not your responsibility to make sure that the information you present is up to date and accurate?

You argue,

Piper's continued advocacy of allowing people into their church fellowship without having practiced believer's baptism is the point, whether or not he temporarily backed away from it for pragmatic reasons.

Piper *personally* holds to a different position, but his advocacy of that position does not mean he *allows* people to be members apart from believer's baptism. There is a difference from a personally held belief and the policy of a church. He said in the interview that BBC indeed does NOT allow people to join apart from believer's baptism. He did not back away because of "pragmatic" reasons but because of **a right understanding of Baptist ecclesiology**—precisely what you charge him of compromising on! He was not going to force this issue but respectfully considered the disagreements among the plurality of elders and concerns of the congregation.

Your circumlocution does not strengthen your argument nor change the error you have made. You have not presented the facts or accurately represented BBC and John Piper. You owe them an apology and should not be defending your rationale with such justifications.

Finally, you are correct to say that your paper does not contain "inflammatory language," but Dr. Lemke, you have wrongly presented a whole host of people. I have shown that you were not fair in [the journalism of Collin Hansen](#), you [falsely labeled "streams" of Calvinism](#), you [wrongfully explained TULIP](#), you misrepresented [Timothy George on ROSES](#), you [bore false witness regarding BBC and John Piper](#), you missed the point of theological triage by Al Mohler, and you wrongly presented by the Presbyterian beliefs of infant baptism. So yes, no inflammatory language, but don't you think that being wrong on all these points will not be considered a real provocation?

I, too, am willing to have good dialogue about these matters. I never questioned your salvation, although I said your scholarship did not represent Christian virtue. You are not telling the truth and representing the positions of those with whom you disagree accurately and fairly. Until you are able to do so, I do not see how anyone will be able to enjoy a productive and engaging discussion with you on these matters. Thanks for your comment, and I do hope that the future holds promise for charitable dialogue for the benefit of all people interested in the gospel, the church, and unity of faith in the fellowship of the saints.

Timmy Brister

END