



An Introduction to “A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation”

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The following is a suggested statement of what Southern Baptists believe about the doctrine of salvation. Compiled by a number of pastors, professors, and leaders in response to the growing debate over Calvinism in Southern Baptist life, it begins with a rationale for such a statement at this time, followed by ten articles of affirmation and denial. The goal was to create a statement that would accurately reflect the beliefs of the majority of Southern Baptists, who are not Calvinists. The concern of the developers of this statement was that the viewpoint of this majority was not well-represented by the term “non-Calvinist” and that an instrument was needed by which that majority might articulate positively what they believe vis-à-vis Calvinism. There is no thought that this document reflects what all Southern Baptists believe or that it should be imposed upon all Southern Baptists. We believe that it does reflect what most Southern Baptists believe for good, biblical reasons. Its purpose is to engender a much needed Convention-wide discussion about the place of Calvinism in Southern Baptist life.

A Statement of the Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation

Preamble

Every generation of Southern Baptists has the duty to articulate the truths of its faith with particular attention to the issues that are impacting contemporary mission and ministry. The precipitating issue for this statement is the rise of a movement called “New Calvinism” among Southern Baptists. This movement is committed to advancing in the churches an exclusively Calvinistic understanding of salvation, characterized by an aggressive insistence on the “Doctrines of Grace” (“TULIP”), and to the goal of making Calvinism the central Southern Baptist position on God’s plan of salvation.

While Calvinists have been present in Southern Baptist life from its earliest days and have made very important contributions to our history and theology, the majority of Southern Baptists do not embrace Calvinism. Even the minority of Southern Baptists who have identified themselves as Calvinists generally modify its teachings in order to mitigate certain unacceptable conclusions (e.g., anti-missionism, hyper-Calvinism, double predestination, limited atonement, etc.). The very fact that there is a plurality of views on Calvinism designed to deal with these weaknesses (variously described as “3-point,” “4-point,” “moderate,” etc.) would seem to call for circumspection and humility with respect to the system and to those who disagree with it.

For the most part, Southern Baptists have been glad to relegate disagreements over Calvinism to secondary status along with other important but “non-essential” theological matters. The Southern Baptist majority has fellowshiped happily with its Calvinist brethren while kindly resisting Calvinism itself. And, to their credit, most Southern Baptist Calvinists have not demanded the adoption of their view as the standard. We would be fine if this consensus continued, but some New Calvinists seem to be pushing for a radical alteration of this long-standing arrangement.

We propose that what most Southern Baptists believe about salvation can rightly be called “Traditional” Southern Baptist soteriology, which should be understood in distinction to “Calvinist” soteriology. Traditional Southern Baptist soteriology is articulated in a general way in the *Baptist Faith and Message*, “Article IV.” While some earlier Baptist confessions were shaped by Calvinism, the clear trajectory of the *BF&M* since 1925 is away from Calvinism. For almost a century, Southern Baptists have found that a sound, biblical soteriology can be taught, maintained, and defended without subscribing to Calvinism. Traditional Southern Baptist soteriology is grounded in the conviction that every person can and must be saved by a personal and free decision to respond to the Gospel by trusting in Christ Jesus alone as Savior and Lord. Without ascribing to Calvinism, Southern Baptists have reached around the world with the Gospel message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. Baptists have been well-served by a straightforward soteriology rooted in the fact that Christ is willing and able to save any and every sinner.

New Calvinism presents us with a duty and an opportunity to more carefully express what is generally believed by Southern Baptists about salvation. It is no longer helpful to identify ourselves by how many points of convergence we have with Calvinism. While we are not insisting that every Southern Baptist affirm the soteriological statement below in order to have a place in the Southern Baptist family, we are asserting that the vast majority of Southern Baptists are not Calvinists and that they do not want Calvinism to become the standard view in Southern Baptist life. We believe it is time to move beyond Calvinism as a reference point for Baptist soteriology.

Below is what we believe to be the essence of a “Traditional Southern Baptist Understanding of God’s Plan of Salvation.” We believe that most Southern Baptists, regardless of how they have described their personal understanding of the doctrine of salvation, will find the following statement consistent with what the Bible teaches and what Southern Baptists have generally believed about the nature of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Articles of Affirmation and Denial

Article One: The Gospel

We affirm that the Gospel is the good news that God has made a way of salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ for any person. This is in keeping with God's desire for every person to be saved.

We deny that only a select few are capable of responding to the Gospel while the rest are predestined to an eternity in hell.

Genesis 3:15; Psalm 2:1-12; Ezekiel 18:23, 32; Luke 19:10; Luke 24:45-49; John 1:1-18, 3:16; Romans 1:1-6, 5:8; 8:34; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Galatians 4:4-7; Colossians 1:21-23; 1 Timothy 2:3-4; Hebrews 1:1-3; 4:14-16; 2 Peter 3:9

Article Two: The Sinfulness of Man

We affirm that, because of the fall of Adam, every person inherits a nature and environment inclined toward sin and that every person who is capable of moral action will sin. Each person's sin alone brings the wrath of a holy God, broken fellowship with Him, ever-worsening selfishness and destructiveness, death, and condemnation to an eternity in hell.

We deny that Adam's sin resulted in the incapacitation of any person's free will or rendered any person guilty before he has personally sinned. While no sinner is remotely capable of achieving salvation through his own effort, we deny that any sinner is saved apart from a free response to the Holy Spirit's drawing through the Gospel.

Genesis 3:15-24; 6:5; Deuteronomy 1:39; Isaiah 6:5, 7:15-16; 53:6; Jeremiah 17:5,9, 31:29-30; Ezekiel 18:19-20; Romans 1:18-32; 3:9-18, 5:12, 6:23; 7:9; Matthew 7:21-23; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; 6:9-10; 15:22; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 9:27-28; Revelation 20:11-15

Article Three: The Atonement of Christ

We affirm that the penal substitution of Christ is the only available and effective sacrifice for the sins of every person.

We deny that this atonement results in salvation without a person's free response of repentance and faith. We deny that God imposes or withholds this atonement without respect to an act of the person's free will. We deny that Christ died only for the sins of those who will be saved.

Psalm 22:1-31; Isaiah 53:1-12; John 12:32, 14:6; Acts 10:39-43; Acts 16:30-32; Romans 3:21-26; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:10-14; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:13-20; 1 Timothy 2:5-6; Hebrews 9:12-15, 24-28; 10:1-18; 1 John 1:7; 2:2

Article Four: The Grace of God

We affirm that grace is God's generous decision to provide salvation for any person by taking all of the initiative in providing atonement, in freely offering the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, and in uniting the believer to Christ through the Holy Spirit by faith.

We deny that grace negates the necessity of a free response of faith or that it cannot be resisted. We deny that the response of faith is in any way a meritorious work that earns salvation.

Ezra 9:8; Proverbs 3:34; Zechariah 12:10; Matthew 19:16-30, 23:37; Luke 10:1-12; Acts 15:11; 20:24; Romans 3:24, 27-28; 5:6, 8, 15-21; Galatians 1:6; 2:21; 5; Ephesians 2:8-10; Philippians 3:2-9; Colossians 2:13-17; Hebrews 4:16; 9:28; 1 John 4:19

Article Five: The Regeneration of the Sinner

We affirm that any person who responds to the Gospel with repentance and faith is born again through the power of the Holy Spirit. He is a new creation in Christ and enters, at the moment he believes, into eternal life.

We deny that any person is regenerated prior to or apart from hearing and responding to the Gospel.

Luke 15:24; John 3:3; 7:37-39; 10:10; 16:7-14; Acts 2:37-39; Romans 6:4-11; 10:14; 1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20; 6:15; Colossians 2:13; 1 Peter 3:18

Article Six: The Election to Salvation

We affirm that, in reference to salvation, election speaks of God's eternal, gracious, and certain plan in Christ to have a people who are His by repentance and faith.

We deny that election means that, from eternity, God predestined certain people for salvation and others for condemnation.

Genesis 1:26-28; 12:1-3; Exodus 19:6; Jeremiah 31:31-33; Matthew 24:31; 25:34; John 6:70; 15:16; Romans 8:29-30, 33; 9:6-8; 11:7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-2; Ephesians 1:4-6; 2:11-22; 3:1-11; 4:4-13; 1 Timothy 2:3-4; 1 Peter 1:1-2; 1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 7:9-10

Article Seven: The Sovereignty of God

We affirm God's eternal knowledge of and sovereignty over every person's salvation or condemnation.

We deny that God's sovereignty and knowledge require Him to cause a person's acceptance or rejection of faith in Christ.

Genesis 1:1; 6:5-8; 18:16-33; 22; 2 Samuel 24:13-14; 1 Chronicles 29:10-20; 2 Chronicles 7:14; Joel 2:32; Psalm 23; 51:4; 139:1-6; Proverbs 15:3; John 6:44; Romans 11:3; Titus 3:3-7; James 1:13-15; Hebrews 11:6, 12:28; 1 Peter 1:17

Article Eight: The Free Will of Man

We affirm that God, as an expression of His sovereignty, endows each person with actual free will (the ability to choose between two options), which must be exercised in accepting or rejecting God's gracious call to salvation by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.

We deny that the decision of faith is an act of God rather than a response of the person. We deny that there is an "effectual call" for certain people that is different from a "general call" to any person who hears and understands the Gospel.

Genesis 1:26-28; Numbers 21:8-9; Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:15; 1 Samuel 8:1-22; 2 Samuel 24:13-14; Esther 3:12-14; Matthew 7:13-14; 11:20-24; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 9:23-24; 13:34; 15:17-20; Romans 10:9-10; Titus 2:12; Revelation 22:17

Article Nine: The Security of the Believer

We affirm that when a person responds in faith to the Gospel, God promises to complete the process of salvation in the believer into eternity. This process begins with justification, whereby the sinner is immediately acquitted of all sin and granted peace with God; continues in sanctification, whereby the saved are progressively conformed to the image of Christ by the indwelling Holy Spirit; and concludes in glorification, whereby the saint enjoys life with Christ in heaven forever.

We deny that this Holy Spirit-sealed relationship can ever be broken. We deny even the possibility of apostasy.

John 10:28-29; 14:1-4; 16:12-14; Philippians 1:6; Romans 3:21-26; 8:29,30; 35-39; 12:1-3; 2 Corinthians 4:17; Ephesians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:12; Colossians 1:21-22; 1 John 2:19; 3:2; 5:13-15; 2 Timothy 1:12; Hebrews 13:5; James 1:12; Jude 24-25

Article Ten: The Great Commission

We affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ commissioned His church to preach the good news of salvation to all people to the ends of the earth. We affirm that the proclamation of the Gospel is God's means of bringing any person to salvation.

We deny that salvation is possible outside of a faith response to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Psalms 51:13; Proverbs 11:30; Isaiah 52:7; Matthew 28:19-20; John 14:6; Acts 1:8; 4:12; 10:42-43; Romans 1:16, 10:13-15; 1 Corinthians 1:17-21; Ephesians 3:7-9; 6:19-20; Philippians 1:12-14; 1 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Timothy 2:5; 2 Timothy 4:1-5