

New Calvinism - The Merger of Calvinism with Worldliness

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Church Issues | *The Sword & Trowel*

December 2009

When I was a youngster and newly saved, it seemed as if the chief goal of all zealous Christians, whether Calvinistic or Arminian, was consecration. Sermons, books and conferences stressed this in the spirit of *Romans 12.1-2*, where the beseeching apostle calls believers to present their bodies a living sacrifice, and not to be conformed to this world. The heart was challenged and stirred. Christ was to be Lord of one's life, and self must be surrendered on the altar of service for him.

But now, it appears, there is a new Calvinism, with new Calvinists, which has swept the old objectives aside. A recent book, *Young, Restless, Reformed*, by Collin Hansen tells the story of how a so-called Calvinistic resurgence has captured the imaginations of thousands of young people in the USA, and this book has been reviewed with great enthusiasm in well-known magazines in the UK, such as *Banner of Truth*, *Evangelical Times*, and *Reformation Today*.

This writer, however, was very deeply saddened to read it, because it describes the New Calvinism as a seriously distorted Calvinism falling far, far short of an authentic life of obedience to a sovereign God. If this kind of Calvinism prospers, then genuine biblical piety will be under attack as never before.

The author of the book is a young man (around 26 when he wrote it) who grew up in a Christian family and trained in secular journalism. We are indebted to him for the readable and wide-reaching survey he gives of this new phenomenon, but the scene is certainly not a happy one.

The author begins by describing the Passion, conference at Atlanta in 2007, where 21,000 young people revelled in contemporary music, and listened to speakers such as John Piper proclaiming Calvinistic sentiments. And this picture is repeated many times through the book – large conferences being described at which the syncretism of worldly, sensation-stirring, high-decibel, rhythmic music, is mixed with Calvinistic doctrine. *This gives a clear picture of what New Calvinism is about.*

We are told of thunderous music, thousands of raised hands, 'Christian' hip-hop and rap lyrics (the examples seeming inept and awkward in construction) uniting the doctrines of grace with the immoral drug-induced musical forms of worldly culture.

Collin Hansen contends that American Calvinism collapsed at the end of the nineteenth century and was maintained by only a handful of people until this great youth revival, but his historical scenario is, frankly, preposterous. As one who regularly visited American seminaries to speak from the early 1970s, I constantly met many preachers and students who loved the doctrines of grace, preaching also in churches of solid Calvinistic persuasion. But firmer evidence of the extensive presence of Calvinism is seen from the fact that very large firms of publishers sent out a stream of reformed literature post-war and through the 1980s. The mighty Eerdmans was solidly reformed in times past, not to mention Baker Book House, and Kregel and others. Where did all these books go – thousands upon thousands of them, including frequently reprinted sets of Calvin's commentaries and a host of other classic works?

In the 1970s and 80s there were also smaller Calvinistic publishers in the USA, and at that time the phenomenon of Calvinistic discount Christian bookshops began, with bulging catalogue lists and a considerable following. The claim that Calvinism virtually disappeared is hopelessly mistaken.

Indeed, a far better quality Calvinism still flourishes in very many churches, where souls are won

and lives sanctified, and where Truth and practice are both under the rule of Scripture. Such churches have no sympathy at all with reporter Collin Hansen's worldly-worship variety, who seek to build churches using exactly the same entertainment methods as most charismatics and the Arminian Calvary Chapel movement.

The new *Calvinism* with the *new* Calvinists constantly extol the Puritans, but they do not want to worship or live as they did. One of the vaunted new conferences is called Resolved, after Jonathan Edwards' famous youthful Resolutions (seventy searching undertakings). But the culture of this conference would unquestionably have met with the outright condemnation of that great theologian.

Resolved is the brainchild of a member of Dr John MacArthur's pastoral staff, gathering thousands of young people annually, and featuring the usual mix of Calvinism and extreme charismatic-style worship. Young people are encouraged to feel the very same sensational nervous impact of loud rhythmic music on the body that they would experience in a large, worldly pop concert, complete with replicated lighting and atmosphere. At the same time they reflect on predestination and election. Worldly culture provides the bodily, emotional feelings, into which Christian thoughts are infused and floated. Biblical sentiments are harnessed to carnal entertainment. (Pictures of this conference on their website betray the totally worldly, showbusiness atmosphere created by the organisers.)

In times of disobedience the Jews of old syncretised by going to the Temple or the synagogue on the sabbath, and to idol temples on weekdays, but the new Calvinism has found a way of uniting spiritually incompatible things at the same time, in the same meeting.

C J Mahaney is a preacher highly applauded in this book. Charismatic in belief and practice, he appears to be wholly accepted by the other big names who feature at the 'new Calvinist' conferences, such as John Piper, John MacArthur, Mark Dever, and Al Mohler. Evidently an extremely personable, friendly man, C J Mahaney is the founder of a group of churches blending Calvinism with charismatic ideas, and is reputed to have influenced many Calvinists to throw aside cessationist views.

It was a protégé of this preacher named Joshua Harris who started the *New Attitude* conference for young people. We learn that when a secular rapper named Curtis Allen was converted, his new-born Christian instinct led him to give up his past life and his singing style. But Pastor Joshua Harris evidently persuaded him not to, so that he could sing for the Lord. The *New Calvinism movement* or *The New Calvinists* do not hesitate to override the instinctual Christian conscience, counselling people to become friends of the world.

One of the mega-churches admired in the book is the six-thousand strong *Mars Hill Church* at Seattle, founded and pastored by Mark Driscoll, who blends emerging church ideas (that Christians should utilise worldly culture) with Calvinistic theology [see endnote 1].

This preacher is also much admired by some reformed men in the UK, but his church has been described (by a sympathiser) as having the most ear-splitting music of any, and he has been rebuked by other preachers for the use of very 'edgy' language and gravely improper humour (even on television). He is to be seen in videos preaching in a Jesus teeshirt, symbolising the new compromise with culture, while at the same time propounding Calvinistic teaching. So much for the embracing of Puritan doctrine divested of Puritan lifestyle and worship.

Most of the well-known preachers who promote and encourage this 'revival' of Calvinism (*or New Calvinism*) have in common the following positions that contradict a genuine Calvinistic (or Puritan) outlook:

1. They have no problem with contemporary charismatic-ethos worship, including extreme, heavy-metal forms.

2. They are soft on separation from worldliness [see endnote 2].
3. They reject the concern for the personal guidance of God in the major decisions of Christians (true sovereignty), thereby striking a death-blow to wholehearted consecration.
4. They hold anti-fourth-commandment views, taking a low view of the Lord's Day, and so inflicting another blow at a consecrated lifestyle.

Whatever their strengths and achievements (and some of them are brilliant men by any human standard), or whatever their theoretical Calvinism, the poor stand of these preachers on these crucial issues will only encourage a fatally flawed version of Calvinism that will lead people to be increasingly wedded to the world, and to a self-seeking lifestyle. Truly proclaimed, the sovereignty of God must include consecration, reverence, sincere obedience to his will, and separation from the world, and the New Calvinism has very little of that.

You cannot have Puritan soteriology without Puritan sanctification. You should not entice people to Calvinistic (or any) preaching by using worldly bait. We hope that young people in this movement will grasp the implications of the doctrines better than their teachers, and come away from the compromises. But there is a looming disaster in promoting this new form of Calvinism (*also known as The New Calvinism.*)

Why do some British Christians who hold the doctrines of grace give enthusiastic reviews to a book like this? There have been times in the past when large numbers of young people have suddenly become intellectually enthusiastic about solid Christian doctrine, only to abandon it almost as quickly. One thinks of the tremendous response the unique oratory of Francis Schaeffer secured on university campuses in the 1960s, and no doubt some young people were truly saved and established, but very many more turned aside. Gripped by the superiority of a biblical worldview, they momentarily despised the illogical, flaccid ideas of this world, but the impression in numerous cases was natural rather than spiritual. The present new, heady Calvinism, shorn of practical obedience will certainly prove to be ephemeral, leaving the cause compromised and scarred.

Has *new Calvinism* come to Britain yet? Alas, yes; one only has to look at the 'blogs' of some younger reformed pastors who put themselves forward as mentors and advisers of others. When you look at their 'favourite films', and 'favourite music' you find them unashamedly naming the leading groups, tracks and entertainment of debased culture, and it is clear that the world is still in their hearts. Years ago, such brethren would not have been baptised until they were clear of the world, but now you can go to seminary, no questions asked, and take up a pastorate, with unfought and unsundered idols in the throne room of your life. What hope is there for churches that have under-shepherds whose loyalties are so divided and distorted?

Aside from pastors, we know some 'new' young Calvinists who will never settle in a dedicated, working church, because their views live only in their heads and not their hearts. We know of some whose lives are not clean. We know of others who go clubbing. The greater their doctrinal prowess, the greater their hypocrisy.

These are harsh words, but they lead me to say that where biblical, evangelical Calvinism shapes conduct, and especially worship, it is a very humbling, beautiful system of Truth, but where it is confined to the head, it inflates pride and self-determination.

The new Calvinism is not a resurgence but an entirely novel formula which strips the doctrine of its historic practice, and unites it with the world.

Why have the leading preachers servicing this movement compromised so readily? They have not been threatened by a Soviet regime. No one has held a gun to their heads. This is a shameful capitulation, and we must earnestly pray that what they have encouraged will not take over Calvinism and ruin a generation of reachable Christian young people.

A final sad spectacle reported with enthusiasm in the book is the *Together for the Gospel* conference, running from 2006. A more adult affair convened by respected Calvinists, this nevertheless brings together cessationists and non-cessationists, traditional and contemporary worship exponents, and while maintaining sound preaching, it conditions all who attend to relax on these controversial matters, and learn to accept every point of view. In other words, the ministry of warning is killed off, so that every -error of the new scene may race ahead unchecked. These are tragic days for authentic spiritual faithfulness, worship and piety.

True Calvinism and worldliness are opposites. Preparation of heart is needed if we would search the wonders and plumb the depths of sovereign grace. We find it in the challenging, convicting call of Joshua:

‘Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.’

Endnotes

1 His resolution of the question of divine sovereignty versus human free will, however, is much nearer to the Arminian view.

2 A recent book entitled *Worldliness: Resisting the Seduction of a Fallen World* by C J Mahaney and others, hopelessly under-equips young believers for separation from the world, especially in the area of music, where, apparently, the Lord loves every genre, and acceptability is reduced to two misleading and subjective questions.

For a more detailed consideration of worship please see the writer’s book *Worship in the Melting Pot*, Wakeman Trust, 2002, ISBN 9781870855334. The first four chapters of this book are shown as articles on this site.