

John Piper, Calvinism, and the FBF

Last spring, I was asked by Kevin Schaal of [Northwest Valley Baptist Church](#) to write an evaluation of the ministry of John Piper from a fundamental Baptist perspective. This paper was to be used to provide background information for a [resolution](#) by the [Fundamental Baptist Fellowship](#) regarding Piper. My paper was also going to be published in the July/August 2005 issue of *FrontLine* magazine, the bimonthly publication of the FBF.

On the whole, the article seemed to be fairly well-received, even among the opponents of the FBF or of resolutions in general. The discussion on [SharperIron](#) seemed to center around the validity of separation itself, rather than any of the claims that I had made about Piper, which I thought was a good sign that I had not misrepresented Piper at all. The most valuable criticism of my paper is that I did not adequately document Piper's sympathy with non-cessationism; I must plead guilty to that charge, although I think [such documentation](#) is available.

In light of the largely positive response to my paper, I was a bit surprised to see a rather unhappy letter to the editor in the September/October issue of *FrontLine*:

In the July/August 2005 issue I was distressed to read the article that is by and large supportive of Dr. John Piper's theology. What the writer fails to disclose to readers is that John Piper is not just an ardent Calvinist and advocate of Lordship Salvation, but he also holds to the position on the gospel which states that regeneration must precede faith.

The following excerpt is from Piper's *Desiring God: Meditations of A [sic] Christian Hedonist*, pp. 65-66.

The native hardness of our hearts makes us unwilling and unable to turn from sin and trust the Savior. Therefore conversion involves a miracle of new birth. Thus new birth precedes and enables faith and repentance. And so when we hear the gospel we will never respond positively unless God performs the miracle of regeneration. Repentance and faith are our work. But we will not repent and believe unless God does his work to overcome our hard and rebellious hearts. This divine work is called regeneration. New birth comes first and enables the repentance and faith of conversion.

This position is a position so extreme, even among Calvinists, that Charles Spurgeon took a stand against and preached to refute it.

The writer expresses concern over John Piper's lack of Biblical separation, which I believe is a bone thrown to appease militant Fundamentalists. To give John Piper passing marks while failing to disclose his extremes is dangerous. Unsuspecting Christians because of this article may read Piper and be drawn into the same out-of-balance positions.

Lou Martuneac
Bolingbrook, IL

(A quick request: does anyone have a first-edition copy of *Desiring God*? I have the 10th anniversary expanded edition, and for the life of me, I cannot find the quotation Mr. Martuneac

cites. Piper is discussing the order of regeneration and faith on those pages in my edition, but he only uses bits and pieces of the quotation Mr. Martuneac references. I'm assuming Piper did some heavy re-writing here, although his position remains unchanged. If anything, Piper is even more direct about the priority of regeneration in this edition.)

At least two things troubled me about this letter. The first was the Mr. Martuneac's idea that Piper's *ordo* is "extreme," and, in fact, "so extreme" that other well-known Calvinists, like Spurgeon, repudiate the position. While I would be the first to acknowledge that Piper's position is not universal among Calvinists (a wonderful professor at [Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary](#), [Dr. Bruce Compton](#), maintains the priority of faith), it is certainly the majority position among those in the Reformed tradition. Mr. Martuneac's misguided appeal to Spurgeon was directly and graciously rebutted in the next issue of *Frontline* by [Mark Snoeberger](#), the director of the library at DBTS. I was, and am, extremely grateful for Mark's response. For those who would like to see more evidence that Spurgeon believed that regeneration precedes faith, read his sermon entitled "[Faith and Regeneration](#)".

My second concern with Mr. Martuneac's letter is his direct attack on my motives. His assertion that my critique of Piper's lack of separatism is a smokescreen, a "bone thrown to appease militant Fundamentalists," is uncharitable and exactly false. I critique Piper's separatism because I think he is wrong, and that his view of separatism runs counter to that of the FBF, on whose behalf I wrote my article. If one gives careful thought to Mr. Martuneac's words, they express a suspicion that I am being dishonest and hypocritical, giving the militant fundamentalists what they really want to hear while endorsing a different position myself. Unfortunately, this was not the last attack on my character from those writing to *FrontLine*.

The following letter appeared in the March/April 2006 issue of *FrontLine*:

I wrote following your September/October issue, expressing my distress that *FrontLine* would allow a student at a Reformed seminary to critique John Piper. The author had totally failed to acknowledge Piper's extreme Reformed theology in his critique of him in that issue. My reaction at the time was, "What can you expect, when you ask the fox to guard the henhouse?"

I opened my November/December issue to discover a letter written by a staff member at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, going to great length to explain how Spurgeon believed one must be regenerated before he could be saved (before faith). If *FrontLine* would devote at least as much space to teaching the opposing view, perhaps it would help to slow the torrent of Reformed theology sweeping away so many sound Fundamental Baptist churches is our day.

I repeat: "If the Fundamental Baptist movement is to survive, it must decide on a position and then decide to defend it."

Mrs. Linda Van Pelt
Brevard, NC

This letter truly disturbed me. Again, I will note two specific problems. The first is that Mrs. Van Pelt seems to think that *fundamental Baptist* and *Calvinist* are mutually exclusive categories. Such a position, of course, runs counter to the true history of both fundamentalism and of the Baptists. Like Mrs. Van Pelt, I would like to see fundamental Baptists "decide on a position and then decide to defend it"; however, I don't think that such a development is necessary to the survival of fundamental Baptists in general, or the FBF in particular. I'm inclined to agree with Mark Dever's [recent comments](#) to the effect that the Calvinist and the Arminian who are both committed to a high view of the gospel are likely to have greater fellowship than two Calvinists, one of whom adopts a seeker-sensitive paradigm for church and the other of whom refuses to compromise the claims of the gospel in the pursuit of relevance.

My other concern is that, again, my character is implicitly assaulted. Comparing me to a fox guarding a henhouse identifies me as a mortal threat to the church. I am reminded of the ongoing correspondence between James White and Ergun Caner (a virulent anti-Calvinist) at aomin.org, in which White repeatedly affirms that he views Caner as a brother in Christ, and in turn gets no response from Caner as to whether he would reciprocate. The implication that White draws (rightfully, I think) is that Caner must not believe that Calvinists, or at least Calvinists like James White, are true believers. This is a tremendously serious charge, and those that make it had better have the theological and exegetical support to maintain such a position. Otherwise, they are truly guilty of splintering God's church.

In response to these letters, I wrote to *FrontLine* about a month ago to defend my original article. Unfortunately, they chose not to run my letter (understandably; this discussion has dragged on for nearly a year, and *FrontLine* is not a blog), and so I am reproducing it here.

I have been more than a little surprised at the distress provoked by my evaluation of John Piper in the July/August 2005 issue of *FrontLine*. I am not surprised that a discussion of Piper would arouse intensely emotional responses; those who view all non-separatists with high suspicion likely think I was too complimentary, while those who have profited from his writings likely think I was too harsh. These criticisms are understandable and expected; it is difficult to strike the right balance on a subject as explosive as separation. What I did not expect, however, was the outrage sparked by my not mentioning and rebutting Piper's Calvinism.

My article about John Piper was intended to present an evaluation of his ministry from the perspective of the FBF. The reason that I did not mention Piper's Calvinism in my critique is that it is entirely irrelevant to that purpose. From the perspective of the FBF, and thus from the perspective of my article, Calvinism is a non-issue. Historically, both Calvinists and Arminians have been counted within the ranks of fundamental Baptists. Thus, it was necessary that my critical comments about Piper's ministry focus on those issues that demonstrate his deviation from essential fundamental Baptist positions, such as his lack of separatism and his openness to non-cessationism. To criticize Piper's Calvinism, regardless of my personal stand on the doctrine, would have been misguided and off-topic. Neither the endorsement nor the rejection of Calvinism has ever been considered necessary for membership in the FBF.

Thus, the suggestion that "the Fundamental Baptist movement...must decide on a position and then decide to defend it" (the context of the comment leaving no doubt as to which position ought to be endorsed) is actually the novel and radical position. Mrs. Van Pelt would have the FBF make the rejection of Calvinism a necessary feature of fundamental Baptist theology. Such a position represents a gross misunderstanding of our common heritage and is an attack on a legitimate expression of Christian unity.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that had my article come out several weeks later, I certainly would have mentioned the proposed alteration of the constitution of Bethlehem Baptist Church, which would have eliminated post-conversion baptism by immersion as a requirement for new members. Thus, a Presbyterian who had been baptized as an infant could transfer membership to Piper's church without being baptized by immersion. Although the proposal has subsequently been withdrawn, this is a clear example of a position that ought to trouble those who cherish the genuine Baptist distinctives.

Calvinism, however, is not one of those distinctives, and I will not treat it as such.

Michael Riley
Tempe, AZ

21 comments:

1. June 24, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [Mathew Sims](#) ([URL](#))

Michael,

I appreciated your critique. I am someone who definitely appreciates Piper's ministry. I always find it humorous/disappointing when people attempt to use Spurgeon to "defeat" Calvinist positions—which he clearly held. Either they have truly been misled about Mr. Spurgeon or they are being purposefully dishonest about the facts.

Also, it is disheartening to hear so many Fundamentalists equal Calvinism with a disease or unfaithfulness to the gospel. Since you mentioned Caner, I found it interesting that while listening to his sermon titled, "Why I'm Predestined Not to Be a Calvinist," he was accusing some segments of Calvinists for lack of evangelistic fervor and mission mindedness and then went to use William Carey as an example of the heart of Baptist missions. I can only give him the benefit of the doubt that he does not know Carey was a Calvinist, but this type of thing "happens" all the time. (Note: Caner does use the term hyper-Calvinist but as his discussion relates to Calvinist in the SBC, the term, I believe, really just means five point Calvinists...)

I appreciate your kind response in return to these accusations. Keep up the good work and keep on striving to honor and glorify the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mathew Sims
Soli Deo Gloria

2. June 24, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) [Timothy Smith](#)

I did not see the original review but I would say that it is not reasonable to evaluate Piper without giving an opinion about Calvinism since this theology comes very close to the central theme of his writings and ministry. One cannot really miss Piper's views on the sovereignty of God and still understand the significance of his ministry.

It is very sad that so many fundamentalists have such a negative view of Calvinism. This is very ironic since fundamentalists are supposed to support a high view of Scripture and the willingness to embrace supernatural explanations when the Bible gives and requires them. It doesn't really make sense to me that so many fundamentalists read into the Bible humanistic assumptions that subvert the plain assertions of Scripture.

3. June 24, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) [Michael Riley](#) ([URL](#))

Timothy,

I think you might have missed the point of some of my comments here. I would agree wholeheartedly that Piper's theology is *essentially* Calvinistic; that is, if you stripped the Calvinism from his theology, the rest of his preaching and writing would fall apart. Thus, an article that is attempting to be a summary of Piper's theology would need to discuss his Calvinism.

That, however, wasn't really the point of my article. What I was attempting to do was to give the FBF enough background information to state their position (organizationally) on Piper. Therefore, the aspects of Piper's ministry that I needed to emphasize were those things that he and the FBF consistently have in common, and those things that he and the FBF consistently differ on. As I mention in my closing letter, Calvinism simply isn't one of those things that is either essential to the FBF or rejected by the FBF. Therefore, while it is entirely and necessarily relevant to Piper's thinking, it wasn't to my article.

4. June 24, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) [Josh Richards](#)

This is exactly what I abhor of fundamentalism, e.g. that we need to highlight any and every difference that we personally may have with John Piper, John MacArthur, etc. Calvinism or the lack thereof is not something that I am willing to separate over, nor should I. Hyper-calvinism is a whole other matter, however. With that in mind, would these folks be willing to demonstrate what makes Piper a hyper-calvinist? He is not one. A little homework goes a long way.

5. June 24, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) [Michael Riley](#) ([URL](#))

Josh,

You're overstating things here, and quite severely. Have you read my article? Did you read the resolution the FBF passed? When they were published, many commented about how reserved they were, and noted that they both commend Piper heartily on several issues. They were not statements merely designed to "highlight any and every difference" we have with Piper.

Again, re-read what I had written: I never suggested that I was attempting to draw attention to

every difference that the FBF has with Piper. John Piper is a well-known figure, highly influential in thoughtful fundamentalist circles today. In light of that, it is quite understandable for the FBF to release a statement that explains their evaluation of him, pro and con, for the benefit and education of the members and their associated churches.

I certainly agree with you that there is a huge segment of fundamentalism (although the problem is not unique to fundamentalists: see Caner/Hunt/et. al.) that badly misuses the terms *hyper-Calvinist*, *Calvinist*, *Arminian*, and *Pelagian*. The insertation of *biblicist* as a supposed other category does not help. But it must be noted that this is not a problem unique to the fundamentalists.

6. June 24, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) **Josh Richards** ([URL](#))
Michael,

This may be a misunderstanding. I was aiming my remark primarily towards Mr. Martuneac's and Mrs. Van Pelt's Frontline letters. I should have been more gracious in my initial comment, nonetheless.

I have read your article. I also would label myself a fundamentalist, and spent many years in the hotbed of hysterical fundamentalism(Hammond,IN). Because of this, I often can seem harsh on elements that remind me of that nonsense.

I extend an apology.

7. June 25, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) **Jason Janz** ([URL](#))
Mike,

The minor problem here is a subtle attack on your motives. My advice would be to get over it. If you stand for anything, you're gonna have howitzers aimed at you regularly.

The much larger issue this "controversy" brings to the forefront is the lack of unity on soteriological issues in fundamentalism. This problem has all but wrecked fundamentalism. It is probably the single primary reason why the Alliance is so attractive to young fundys.

8. June 25, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) **Donald C S Johnson**
Mike and Jason,

First, I agree with Mike that rejection of Calvinism should not be an necessary feature of fundamental Baptist theology. I would submit that neither should the rejection of Arminianism (or the many shades of thought [or non-thought] in between) be a necessary feature of that theology. That simply isn't the issue.

But... it does seem that some want to make it an issue. Jason says that "the problem has all but wrecked fundamentalism". If that is so, that is a great tragedy. Why should the young fundys (Jason's term) be so attracted to the Alliance? Why must they insist on a lock-step view of soteriology? Why is this becoming, in the minds of some, the sine qua non of faithful

Christianity?

Regards,
Don Johnson
Jer 33.3

9. June 26, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [Johannesburg Christian](#)

NOTE: This comment has been edited by the blog owner.

Because the commenter wished to remain anonymous, the blog owner believed it best to edit this comment down to the following summary statement:

“A brother from South Africa commented that Mr. Martuneac evidenced a divisive spirit over the issues of Lordship Salvation and Calvinism during his (Martuneac’s) ministry in South Africa.”

10. June 26, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [bob bixby](#)

Mike,

Good job.

I sort of agree with Jason about “getting over” the attack on your personal motives, but at the same time I sympathize. Somehow, somewhere, somebody has got to address this problem. It is distressing to any thinker. Yet at the same time you almost have to be resigned to the fact that if you are going to speak your mind, your character will be attacked.

It’s too bad.

11. June 26, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) | [Pastor Mike Harding](#)

Dear Mike Riley,

I appreciated your article and thought it was well written. The criticism you have received from Lou Martuneac is unfair and prejudicial. Lou has written a new book entitled, “In Defense of the Gospel,” in order to defeat any Calvinistic or Lordship influence in Fundamental circles. At the National FBFI meeting in San Francisco Martuneac’s book was advertised quite overtly in the conference notebook. Nothing was said about the book from the platform. The book is being recommended by several prominent leaders in the FBFI. Dr. Jeff Straub is preparing a book review. His preliminary finding is that the book is poorly written, poorly researched, and is highly prejudicial. Comparitively speaking Martuneac’s book makes Dave Hunt’s recent book on Calvinism look like genuine scholarship. Having read most of MacArthur’s books on this subject as well as John Piper, Carson, and Boice, I can safely say that they are essentially correct. My only caution is that in the midst of polemics one can be guilty of overstatement. On occasion some of the “Lordship” writers can make isolated statements that on the surface seem contradictory to sola fide. Martuneac has picked up on these statements and exploited them for his own version of the “Dallas Doctrine.”

12. June 26, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) [Michael Riley](#) ([URL](#))

All,

Thanks for the comments. A recurring theme seems to be that I need to be a little less thin-skinned about attacks on my motives and character. I do appreciate the reminder, but I'm actually a little more disappointed that I came across as being whiny in the first place. That honestly was not my intention. I think Bob really came closest to really getting my reason for commenting on the tone of the letters: I was more disappointed that fellow Christians would address one another in such a manner and that *FrontLine* would publish it than I was personally offended that someone called me names. However, I suppose that I really can't present myself as an objective critic of a letter that is critical of me without sounding a least a little self-pitying. Please accept my apologies about this.

Johannesburg Christian and Pastor Harding,

Thanks for the background information on Mr. Martuneac. It is generally quite helpful to have background information on an author to understand his writings; your posts helped clarify his letter. In the main, both of your posts stuck to providing valuable factual information. For others who might wish to comment, however, I would request that, unless it is specifically germane to the actual issues under consideration, that we not turn this into a thread about the personalities involved.

All, again,

I think Don has really hit the nail on the head with his questions. For all who know me, you know that I am not a soft or apathetic Calvinist. I believe that the doctrines of grace best capture the intent of Scripture, and that they best magnify the glory and grandeur of God. I think that Arminians would be more biblical if they became Calvinists. I don't think that we ought to simply set such doctrinal concerns aside in the interest of an illusory unity. At a local church level, I am completely comfortable with a church insisting that its leadership or even its membership be Calvinists (or even Arminians, for that matter).

However, at broader levels of fellowship, such as that provided by the FBF, I simply can't justify a demand for unanimity of soteriological positions, provided that everyone's soteriology is at least orthodox (a point that is at least up for debate, in some of the extremes). Would such unanimity be good? Of course, and I think it should be pursued. But I don't think it should be demanded.

13. June 27, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#)) [Don Johnson](#)

Mike, to me the orthodox statement of soteriology is something like this: Salvation is by grace through faith, not of works, lest any man should boast.

To me, this sums up entirely the doctrine, while our various permutations on the other attendant passages may vary, in general, I believe an Arminian or a Calvinist (and the various shades in between) can affirm it wholeheartedly. For me, that is good enough. It can work for me even on a local church level, although some Calvinists would not like my preaching!

Regards
Don Johnson
Jer 33.3

14. June 27, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#))| [Scott Aniol](#) ([URL](#))

That may be true, Don, but your understanding of the “other attendant passages” may very well affect your presentation of orthodox soteriology. Thus the Calvinist’s possible discomfort with your preaching! :)

15. June 27, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#))| **Henry Hilgartner**

Iv’e just read the letters and comments – Whew! I’m glad I no longer describe myself as a Fundamentalist!! It seems that “Fundamentalism” has become an end unto its self – Denominations and Unions come and go. Read about the “downgrade Syndrome that Spurgeon was afflicted with. They begin to wane about the time that their superstructure becomes top heavy and biblically unfocused. When it’s more important to “save the ship” than save the truth – no matter what the cost... it’s time to scuttle it!

Mr. Don Johnson stated this “the orthodox statement of soteriology is something like this: Salvation is by grace through faith, not of works, lest any man should boast.” Check and see if there is a Catholic who does’nt agree with that as an orthodox statement. This impresses two points – the necessity for better clarity and for a wider view of reformation history. Luther inserted the key word “sola” (i.e. salvation through faith alone, by grace alone through Christ alone...)

I hope I’m not just parroting a “lock step view” – but biblical truth. After all, could there be anything more significant than accurately understanding the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

16. June 28, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#))| [Michael Riley](#) ([URL](#))

Henry,

I’m going to agree with you that Don’s proposed soteriology statements needs a bit more fleshing out (my guess is that Don himself didn’t intend it to be the final word on the subject). I also cherish the gospel, and I have very definite opinions on exactly what the gospel means. Furthermore, I believe that every one of those opinions is in fact correct; there is not a single belief that I hold that I think is the wrong belief. (Note: this is not to say that I think I cannot be wrong, or that I hold every belief with equal confidence, but merely to assert that I do not consciously hold to any beliefs that I think are wrong. To do otherwise would be dumb.)

Where I disagree with you (at least, if I’m understanding your post correctly), is that I think there are levels of fellowship that I can maintain with people with whom I am not in absolute agreement, given agreement on certain foundational truths. Again, such fellowship, at least in my estimation, isn’t terribly practical or desirable on a local church level. But I see no reason to disparage unity at a broader level on the clear and essential truths of the faith.

Again, I’d draw your attention to Mohler’s article that I linked in my main article.

Oddly, while the *FrontLine* letters seemed to want to exclude all Calvinists from fundamental fellowship, the bloggers seem to want to exclude the Arminians.

17. July 01, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#))| [Donald C S Johnson](#)

Hi guys,

In giving my statement I am attempting to get to the kernel (the kerygma for you learned types). I am not prepared to think that a Catholic would actually accept that kernel, not really.

Obviously, since I am just repeating Scripture, they would say they agree with it, but everything else they say and do belies that affirmation.

Scott, you are right that my understanding of some of the other passages might give Calvinists some discomfort. I hope that I also would cause Arminians the same (albeit on different points). I am an equal opportunity insulter!

Regards,

Don Johnson

Jer 33.3

18. July 03, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#))| [Keith Phillips](#)

Dear Michael Riley,

While I don't share your concern over Piper's lack of separation, I have genuinely appreciated what I have read on your blog. Therefore, please don't take the following question as some type of inflammatory insult. It is an honest question:

Did the FBF and its publications really change so much at some point in the last 20 years that one should be surprised at letters such as those written in response to your Piper article?

In the mid to late 80's, my friends and I knew the FBF as "The Fist Fightin' Backbitin' Fundamentalists." Every issue of their newsletter was full of harsh rhetoric. Has there really been reformation?

Sincerely,

Keith Phillips

19. July 05, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#))| [Michael Riley](#) ([URL](#))

Keith,

I don't know that I can honestly answer your question, because 20 years ago, I was a nominally-Catholic six-year-old. :)

I really had no contact with the FBF until I began attending First Baptist of Troy, MI during 9th

grade (a little over ten years ago). Even now, I am not actually a member (not for reason of principle; I just never got around to joining). Thus, I am not privy to the internal politics of the group.

However, from what I know of the FBF, I wouldn't be terribly surprised if the organization as it is now is significantly different than your remembrance of it. I would encourage you to find some recent editions of *FrontLine* magazine. In the main, the articles written there are even-handed and intelligent. Mark Minnick's column is an absolute must-read as a model of careful exegesis and fervant piety. I honestly don't think that there's much there in terms of harsh rhetoric.

Again, I have nothing to which to compare my experience of the FBF. Perhaps our different understandings of separation will necessarily result in our seeing the FBF differently. But, in the main, I don't see the current FBF as a cantankerous, bitter organization.

20. July 06, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#))| [Mike Harding](#)

The only harsh rhetoric I have read in Frontline has been from an occasional letter sent in by a subscriber. Other than that one would be hard pressed to prove that Frontline has been harsh or overly critical. The weakness in the FBF is the weakness reflected by Baptist Fundamentalism in general. There are some who are irrationally addicted to the KJV, who have a strong anti-Calvinist and anti-Lordship bent, and others who tend to be anti-intellectual. As a member of the FBF I tend to be outspoken on these issues and I was able to write or edit significant sections of the FBF doctrinal statement. The battle for truth is never-ending. Even in a good organization one has to stand up for truth though it harms one's own reputation or position. Been there; done that!

21. July 08, 2006 ([Edit](#) / [Delete](#))| [Chris Anderson](#) ([URL](#))

Pastor Harding,

I was speaking with someone at the OBF Conference a few weeks ago about your "Let it bleed" message that addressed these issues in the FBF. Is that available somewhere as an mp3? Thanks.