

Thomas J. Nettles. *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life*. Revised and Expanded 20th Anniversary Edition. Cape Coral, Fl: Founders Press, 2007. Pp. xlvii, 486. \$24.95, hardback.

Baptists who adhere to a reformed soteriology often speak of their conversion in two stages – one where they embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ and thus became children of God and another where they discovered the teachings attributed to John Calvin and thus became members of the reformed camp. The former (and most important of the two) occurs in virtually every venue imaginable but sources related to the latter are rather limited. The “conversion to Calvinism” normally comes about through studying Romans, reading Spurgeon or listening to Piper. Baptists who experience this change tend to talk as if it were a “second blessing” – and they soon find out that many Baptist friends treat them as if they have, thus raising the question as to whether they can remain reformed and Baptist at the same time. For Baptists with such concerns, Thomas Nettles has provided a book that, for over twenty years, has served as their single-source support group.

By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life first appeared in 1986, when Southern Baptists were engaged in a controversy over the truthfulness of Scripture. One could hardly have imagined back then that Baptists who agreed on the term “inerrancy” would now be debating amongst themselves about the term “predestination.” While the original version anticipated difficulties that Reformed Southern Baptists would face among their denominational colleagues, the updated version relates the progress that has been made over the last two decades and offers a gentle reminder that much more groundwork has to be done in order to help a Bible-believing, gospel-proclaiming denomination return to (or at least, not reject) its Calvinistic roots.

The book is divided into three sections: historical evidence, doctrinal exposition and practical exhortation. The first section is by far the longest, covering three-hundred pages and beginning with information on English Baptists such as Keach, Bunyan, Gill and Fuller. Nettles ably demonstrates that although Arminian influences existed within the nascent movement, a strong and steady stream of Calvinistic teaching came through the pens and pulpits of these men and their successors. From there, Nettles describes how their American counterparts espoused a similar theological stance through the efforts of Backus, Leland, Rice and Judson. He continues in the same path by noting how the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention were calvinistically inclined, using the theology of W.B. Johnson, R.B.C. Howell, and P.H. Mell to substantiate his claims.

By this point, the theme has been well-established: Leading Baptist figures historically have embraced the doctrines of grace commonly called Calvinism. Still, further support for his thesis appears through the founding of Southern Seminary where Baptist stalwarts taught, such as the Basil Manlys (Sr. and Jr.), James Boyce and John Broadus, continuing down to their somewhat lesser known successors (F.H. Kerfoot, E.C. Dargan, and J.B. Gambrell). Calvinistic theology even passed the Texas smell-test through the work of J.B. Tidwell, head of the Bible department at Baylor from 1910-1946.

If history had continued in this direction, then Nettles's book would have no *raison d'être*. Thus the book takes an ominous tone with the chapter entitled "The Road Not Taken." Dealing, as he does, with the early part of the twentieth century, Nettles examines the theological enigma of E.Y. Mullins, whose theological method brought not only a change of course for Calvinism in Baptist life but also raised new questions about the nature of Scripture and justification, to name just two. Consequently, Mullins began to reshape what many Baptists understood about God's elective purpose. Nettles observes, "Emphasis on human consciousness and experience so predominate in the totality of Mullins's theology that human decision and freedom eventually overshadow and crowd out effectual divine activity" (197–198). Although Nettles clarifies Mullins' theology a bit, adding that he still retained an emphasis on God's mercy and grace in salvation to the elect, it is clear that theological change was in the air. He further documents this change by detailing the evangelistic methodology of L. R. Scarborough, who served as chair of evangelism ("Chair of Fire") at Southwestern Seminary and produced "more books on evangelism and personal soul-winning than any other individual" in the Baptist movement (209–214).

The original version of *By His Grace and For His Glory* then moves to doctrinal exposition. This updated version, however, continues to elaborate the history of this theological transition by detailing contributions from such 20th century figures such as W.O. Carver, W.T. Conner, Herschel Hobbs and Dale Moody. This inclusion serves as a helpful reminder of how quickly a denomination can abandon a position strongly held less than half a century before. Although Nettles does not assign sole responsibility to these men (he earlier cites other causes such as the rise of the Cooperative Program and indifference toward doctrine in Baptist literature) it is clear that their status in the Baptist community enabled them to effect change without causing concern among the Baptist faithful. Herschel Hobbs, for example, was the denominational statesman of his day who defended the doctrine of perseverance but refrained from advocating the removal of the person teaching it (Dale Moody). Interestingly, Hobbs assumed the sovereignty of God in *keeping* people saved without connecting it to the sovereignty of God in *getting* people saved. His understanding of the doctrines of grace thus mirrored the spirit of Baptists of his time rather than those of old: "I am more interested in what Jesus said and Paul wrote than what Boyce, Dagg, *et al* wrote" (237).

The updated version also contains a chapter detailing the steady resurgence of Calvinism in Baptist life from the late 1970s to the present. Entitled "Lead Me in a Level Path Because of My Foes," this chapter highlights perspectives from more familiar names including both advocates of Calvinism (e.g., Albert Mohler, Timothy George and Mark Dever) and its detractors (e.g., Adrian Rogers, Paige Patterson and Fisher Humphreys). It should be noted that the detractors considerably outnumber the advocates of Calvinism in Baptist life, but this is not an attempt by Nettles to demonize anyone. He is simply stating the factual nature of the difficulties Reformed Southern Baptists have faced in becoming part of the mainstream again. Furthermore, Nettles points out an interesting, yet complicating factor – moderate and conservative Baptists finally found something to agree upon: Calvinism should be opposed.

The remaining two sections of the book deal with doctrinal exposition and practical exhortation. Due to the limits of this review, it is impossible to fully examine each section. Suffice it to say, however, that these two sections could have made a good

book on their own merits but their inclusion here makes *By His Grace and For His Glory* all the better. Having read Nettles's overwhelmingly convincing argument that Calvinism has played a significant role in the theology of our Baptist forbears, one is helped by learning how to think through these issues for one's self. In four chapters he discusses the five points of Calvinism (combining depravity and effectual calling into one), thus providing a modern primer on our indebtedness to so great a salvation. Nettles then concludes with three chapters of practical exhortation on such important issues as the doctrine of assurance, liberty of conscience, and world missions. The importance of such an ending to this book cannot be overstated, since those who have suddenly found themselves in line with historic Baptist principles are reminded not to neglect historic biblical practices.

As mentioned earlier, Nettles's original edition helped to start a much needed discussion on the role of Calvinism in Baptist life. His revised version is significant in that he brings up to date the progress made and difficulties faced by those who are convinced that salvation is the work of God from beginning to end. People who have long admired the work of Mohler, George and Dever (and Tom Nettles, for that matter) will now know that they have found the modern equivalents of Manly, Boyce and Broadus. Moreover, the reader will be impressed by Nettles's ability to critique the conclusions of others without himself becoming overly critical. For example, though Nettles cites L. R. Scarborough as a transitional figure who contributed to the decline of Calvinism in Baptist life, he writes, "To call into question either the sincerity of the genuine Christian piety of Scarborough would be criminal, not to mention grossly erroneous" (214). Likewise, he notes that Frank Page's objections to Calvinism arise from "the utter sincerity and dead earnestness of the pastoral concern many had about the impact of the doctrines of grace" (272).

Since it is customary to include weaknesses of a given work, here are a few suggestions of what might have made this superior work somewhat better. Historically speaking, the book is a bit one-sided. One who is familiar with the arguments over Calvinism knows that Calvinists have often turned against one another in discussing issues like the extent of the atonement and the role of evangelism. Though Nettles deals with these concerns in the sections on Gill and Fuller, the difficulties seem to disappear shortly thereafter. Thus an opportunity is missed in discussing how Primitive Baptists in America opposed missions, ministerial education and denominational cooperation all in the name of Calvinism. Nettles, of course, is well aware of these issues, and one must keep in mind that his book cannot tell every possible story, but an uninformed reader might gain the false impression that if the SBC embraced Calvinism once more then all would be well.

Another shortcoming of the book is that it represents history as though it occurs from the top down. In other words, Nettles's focus on leading Baptists assumes that ordinary Baptists were aware of their writings and embraced their conclusions. To a degree, such is the case. As leading educators trained young pastors, the connection between the classroom and congregation was made (see his discussion of Dale Moody for further proof!). However, a significant amount of work remains to be done on the history of Calvinism in the SBC from the bottom up. Movement of this sort was mentioned by Nettles in his discussion of the Boyce Project, Founder's Ministries and 9Marks Ministries, but one would like more evidence of how the five points of Calvinism were

understood and applied by ordinary Baptists from the 18th to early 20th century as well. Such an inclusion might have reminded lay persons of their responsibility to think through these issues too.

It is unfortunate that certain people have sought to eradicate Calvinism from Baptist life in recent years, but Thomas Nettles has demonstrated that any attempt to do so would be a radical departure from very strong Baptist roots. This twentieth-anniversary edition brings the discussion up to date and also raises the question of what will become of Reformed Southern Baptists over the next twenty years. One thing is certain – if not for the initial and now subsequent appearance of *By His Grace and For His Glory* the onus of proof would still be on those who claim Calvinism is compatible with Baptist thought. The sympathetic reader of this book is thereby indebted to Thomas Nettles for helping to turn the tables on this discussion.

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