

Evangelicals Find Themselves in the Midst of a Calvinist Revival

JAN. 3, 2014

The New York Times

For those who are sad that the year-end news quizzes are past, here's one to start 2014: If you have joined a church that preaches a Tulip theology, does that mean a) the pastor bakes flowers into the communion wafers, b) the pastor believes that flowers that rise again every spring symbolize the resurrection, or c) the pastor is a Calvinist?

As an increasing number of Christians know, the answer is "c." The acronym summarizes John Calvin's so-called doctrines of grace, with their emphasis on sinfulness and predestination. The T is for man's Total Depravity. The U is for Unconditional Election, which means that God has already decided who will be saved, without regard to any condition in them, or anything they can do to earn their salvation.

The acronym gets no cheerier from there.

Evangelicalism is in the midst of a Calvinist revival. Increasing numbers of preachers and professors teach the views of the 16th-century French reformer. Mark Driscoll, John Piper and Tim Keller — megachurch preachers and important evangelical authors — are all Calvinist. Attendance at Calvin-influenced worship conferences and churches is up, particularly among worshipers in their 20s and 30s.

In the Southern Baptist Convention, the country's largest Protestant denomination, the rise of Calvinism has provoked discord. In [a 2012 poll](#) of 1,066 Southern Baptist pastors conducted by LifeWay Research, a nonprofit group associated with the Southern Baptist Convention, 30 percent considered their churches Calvinist — while twice as many were concerned "about the impact of Calvinism."

Calvinism is a theological orientation, not a denomination or organization. The Puritans were Calvinist. Presbyterians descend from Scottish Calvinists. Many early Baptists were Calvinist. But in the 19th century, Protestantism moved toward the non-Calvinist belief that humans must consent to their own salvation — an optimistic, quintessentially American belief. In the United States today, one large denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, is unapologetically Calvinist.

But in the last 30 years or so, Calvinists have gained prominence in other branches of Protestantism, and at churches that used to worry little about theology. In 1994, when Mark Dever interviewed at [Capitol Hill Baptist Church](#), a Southern Baptist church in Washington, the hiring committee didn't even ask him about his theology.

"So I said, 'Let me think about what you wouldn't like about me, if you knew,' " Mr. Dever recalled. And he told them that he was a Calvinist. "And I had to explain to them what that meant. I didn't want to move my wife and children here and lose the job."

Mr. Dever, 53, said that when he took over in 1994, about 130 members attended on Sundays, and their average age was 70. Today, the church gets about 1,000 worshipers, with an average age of 30. And while Mr. Dever tends not to mention Calvin in his sermons, his educated audience, many of whom work in politics, knows, and likes, what it is hearing.

"I think it is apparent in his teaching," said Sarah Rotman, 34, who works for the World Bank. "The real focus on Scripture, and that all the answers we seek in this life can be found in the word of God. In a lot of his preaching, he does really talk about our sinfulness and our need of the Savior."

That focus on sinfulness differs from a lot of popular evangelicalism in recent years. It runs contrary to the "prosperity gospel" preachers, who imply that faith can make one rich. It sounds nothing like the feel-good

affirmations of preachers and authors like Joel Osteen, who treat the Bible like a self-help book, or a guide to better business.

"What you'd be hearing in some megachurches is, 'God wants you to be a good parent, and here are seven ways God can help you to be a good parent,' " said Collin Hansen, the author of "Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey With the New Calvinists." "Or, 'God wants you to have a good marriage, so here are three ways to do that.' " By contrast, Mr. Hansen said, those who attend Calvinist churches want the preacher to "tell them about Jesus."

Some non-Calvinists say that the rise of Calvinism has been accomplished in part through sneaky methods. Roger E. Olson, a Baylor University professor and the author of "Against Calvinism," is the Calvinists' most outspoken critic.

"One of the concerns is that new graduates from certain Baptist seminaries have been infiltrating churches that are not Calvinist, and not telling the churches or search committees who are not Calvinist," Professor Olson said. According to what he has heard, young preachers "wait several months and then begin to stock the church library with books" by Calvinists like John Piper and Mark Driscoll. They hold special classes on Calvinist topics, he said, and they staff the church with fellow Calvinists.

"Often the church ends up splitting, with the non-Calvinists starting their own church," Professor Olson said.

At its annual meeting in June, the Southern Baptist Convention received a report from its special Calvinism Advisory Committee, which addressed charges both of anti-Calvinist prejudice within the denomination and of unfair dealing by Calvinists.

"We should expect all candidates for ministry positions in the local church to be fully candid and forthcoming about all matters of faith and doctrine," the report read.

While many neo-Calvinists shy away from politics, they generally take conservative positions on Scripture and on social issues. Many don't believe that women should be ministers or elders. But Serene Jones, the president of Union Theological Seminary, said that Calvin's influence was not limited to conservatives.

Liberal Christians, including some Congregationalists and liberal Presbyterians, may just take up other aspects of Calvin's teachings, Dr. Jones said. She mentioned Calvin's belief that "civic engagement is the main form of obedience to God." She added that, unlike many of today's conservatives, "Calvin did not read Scripture literally." Often Calvin "is misquoting it, and he makes up Scripture passages that don't exist."

Brad Vermurlen, a Notre Dame graduate student writing a dissertation on the new Calvinists, said that the rise of Calvinism was real, but that the hoopla might level off.

"Ten years ago, everyone was talking about the 'emergent church,' " Mr. Vermurlen said. "And five years ago, people were talking about the 'missional church.' And now 'new Calvinism.' I don't want to say the new Calvinism is a fad, but I'm wondering if this is one of those things American evangelicals want to talk about for five years, and then they'll go on living their lives and planting their churches. Or is this something we'll see 10 or 20 years from now?"