

"A BRIEF SURVEY AND SCRIPTURAL CRITIQUE OF THE PRIMITIVE BAPTISTS"

I. THE ORIGIN OF THE PRIMITIVE BAPTISTS

The origin of the Primitive Baptists goes back to the protests of some Baptist churches against the missionary societies which were formed in the early 1800's.

These churches took the position that there were no missionary societies in the days of the apostles, neither did the Scriptures dictate for any, so therefore there shouldn't be any in our day either. On this basis they separated from other Baptist bodies which supported the mission societies and the assessing of churches for missionary support.

Being opposed to missions in this way the Primitive Baptists had no part in the great missionary endeavors of the early 1800's which resulted in hundreds of missionaries carrying the gospel to other parts of the world and multitudes being converted to Christ. It has been said that the anti-mission movement of the Primitive Baptists is the saddest chapter in Baptist history.

II. ORGANIZATION AND PRACTICES

The Primitive Baptists have never been organized as a denomination and have no administrative bodies of any kind. In the years that followed, the Primitive Baptist churches adopted the practice of printing their annual minutes, constitutions, and rules of order. These were examined by other churches and those that approved were taken into their fellowship of churches. Those churches that disapproved were dropped from the fellowship of approving churches. In a general sense this practice is still followed today.

Primitive Baptists participate in the two NT church ordinances of the Lord's Supper and baptism by immersion. They also practice foot-washing as an ordinance of Christian humility.

On the same basis by which the Primitive Baptists opposed the mission societies (silence of Scripture) they also oppose Sunday School training for children, musical instruments for their services, and theological training for ministers. Educated ministers are declared by them to be "tools of the devil."

Because of their position concerning theological training for ministers, much of what they preach and practice is from oral tradition handed down from one group to another. Their preaching content comprises such things as personal experiences through dreams and visions. In fact, some dream or vision becomes the basis by which one of their number is called to the ministry. In this sense the Primitive Baptists are like many of the cultic groups - they rely on extra-biblical revelations and not wholly upon the Scriptures.

III. DOCTRINAL BELIEFS AND TEACHINGS

Since Primitive Baptists are opposed to theological training for its ministers they have no systematized theology. They have no organized system of hermeneutics for interpreting the Word of God. Most of their "elders" (which they choose to be called) preach an assortment or what they have heard others of their number say and they perpetuate certain unscriptural teachings which have their roots in the system of theology which originated with a French theologian named John Calvin (1509-1564).

The sad part about what they believe is that they have a false concept of where these teaching originated. Without formal theological training they haven't studied the backgrounds of Arminianism or Calvinism and the Primitive Baptists blindly follow the hyper-calvinistic teachings of John Calvin and his followers thinking that what they believe is Scriptural. To support his belief system Calvin imposed certain preconceptions upon his interpretation of Scriptures and framed a theology which is biased and erroneous.

Strong Calvinism is the core of what Primitive Baptist believe and preach. Just what did John Calvin teach that the Primitive Baptists have blindly perpetuated?

A. Calvin's teachings in a general sense

Calvin built a system of theology based upon the sovereignty of God at the exclusion of man's responsibility. Calvin's conclusions were supported by human reason and a logical order as follows: He surmised since God is completely sovereign and knows all things and controls all things He knows who will be saved and who won't. Since all men will not be saved it follows that it is not in God's sovereign will for all men to be saved. If this is the case, then Christ only died for those who would be saved. Since Christ died for this elect group then God sovereignly works to save them and to preserve them apart from any initiative on their part.

B. Calvin's teachings in a specific sense

John Calvin's teachings followed five specific areas and have been known as the "five points of Calvinism." These include total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Those who subscribe to these teachings have been referred to as "tulip people" (an acronym formed from these letters).

1. Total depravity

According to Calvin's teachings on total depravity no man has the ability to come to Christ and be saved unless God gives him that ability. Calvin saw man, not only spiritually dead after his fall in Gen. 3, but also in a state of "total inability." In this state Calvin believed that men were like Lazarus in the tomb - they have no capacity to respond to God's Word or to respond to God unless God over-powers them and gives them that ability.

Refutation: We agree with Calvin that man is totally depraved by nature - the Bible teaches that there is nothing good in man and he does not merit salvation neither can he earn it. But we do not agree with the calvinistic picture of total depravity. Lazarus was dead but he was able to hear Jesus'

words and to respond to those words. Total depravity is the "standing" of a lost sinner before God but it does not mean total inability. Man is spiritually dead (separated from God) but he is not volitionally dead.

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit gives totally depraved people the capacity to choose between God's Word and their own way. The Bible also teaches that man is both capable and responsible before God.

Numerous times in the Bible God calls upon man to seek the Lord, to find Him, to turn to Him, to search for Him, to believe in Him and to repent. Calvin taught that man cannot do anything without God giving him the capacity to do so. If that were true then God would be a respecter of persons and also unjust to give one man such ability and not to give it to another. The truth is - the sin of unbelief is the worse sin a person can commit (Heb. 3:12-19). To say that man can't believe unless God gives him that ability is to charge God with the sin of unbelief with those who can't respond.

The fallacy in Calvin's teachings concerning total depravity come to light as we consider the facts concerning man's will. Does man have a will? The answer is yes and God holds a man responsible for the exercise of his own free will. Because man has a will it is not a matter of whether he *can* come to Christ; it is a matter of whether he *will* come to Christ. Scriptures make it clear that condemnation is predicated upon the exercise of one's will and not some God-given ability to believe (Matt. 23:37; John 5:40; Rev. 22:17). It should be seen that the only thing which stands between the sinner and salvation is the exercise of the sinner's will.

Some calvinists use John 6:44 to try to prove that depravity means total inability. It says, "no man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him..." But Jesus said, "and I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). The Bible shows that all men are drawn to Christ but all men will not trust Christ as Saviour.

Why do men go to hell? Is it because they have not been given the ability to respond to God? NO, in the final analysis, men go to hell, not because of their inability to come to Christ, but because they will not come to Christ. The Scriptures make it absolutely clear that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (II Pet. 3:9). It is also clear that man is called upon to exercise his will and believe (Acts 16:31; Jn. 3:16).

2. Unconditional Election

Calvin reasoned that if a man is unable to save himself because he is totally depraved, and if God alone can save, then God has not chosen to save everyone, since everyone will not be saved. By unconditional election Calvin believed some were elected to heaven while others were elected to hell. Since this matter is wholly on God's part, it is unconditional or without any condition on man's part.

According to Calvin's teachings an individual has absolutely nothing to do with salvation. He believed God decided who would go to heaven and who would go to hell before the foundation of the world. This means it is by God's own choice alone that some people are damned forever to hell. And the reason is - God never intended to save them, because He foreordained them to go to hell.

Where does this leave an individual according to Calvin's teachings? He can only hope that God has elected him to heaven and not hell.

Refutation: The fundamental flaw in Calvin's teachings on unconditional election must be seen in his view regarding God's foreknowledge. It is a fact that God has foreknowledge of all events before they come to pass, but God's foreknowledge is an attribute of God and not an act. His foreknowledge according to the Bible is not causative. In other words just because God knows what will happen doesn't mean He will cause it to happen (I Sam. 23:7-13).

An illustration of God's foreknowledge would be a plane flying high in the sky above a road. A person in the plane can see for miles down the road, but the cars on that road can only see what is in front of them. The person in the plane can see that a bridge has collapsed and he knows that a car will fall into the river if the driver does not heed the detour sign and change directions. God can see everything that will happen to us just like the person in the plane can see for miles. God sees that a person will reject Him and be eternally damned but He doesn't cause it to happen. The Bible shows that man has been given a free will to choose.

No where in the Bible does it teach that God wills some to go to heaven and He wills others to go to hell. On the contrary, the Bible teaches that God would have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (I Tim. 2:4). The Bible teaches that God is not willing that any should perish (II Pet. 3:9). The Scriptures make it clear that nobody is predestined to hell. Those who choose, of their own free will, to reject Christ will go there but it's not because God foreordained them to hell (Jn. 3:36).

It must be seen that men go to hell because of their own unbelief and this is the worse sin a person can commit. To say that some can't believe is to charge God with sin.

The Bible teaches since Christ died for the sin of the whole world the offer of salvation is extended to the whole world (Jn. 1:29; Jn. 3:16; I Jn. 2:2). This means anyone can be saved if he will choose to receive Christ as his Savior (Rev. 22:17).

God's attitude toward the unsaved is clearly revealed in the Scriptures and it is for men to turn in repentance and be saved not to send men to hell (Ezek. 33:10,11; II Pet. 3:9; I Tim. 2:4; Heb. 2:9; Jn. 3:18,36).