This report is intended to be a resource to help Fundamentalist Christians in studying and evaluating religious leaders and movements. It draws primarily upon materials housed in the Fundamentalism File in the J. S. Mack Library on the campus of Bob Jones University.

Although every effort has been made to provide an impartial study of the topic, this work will naturally reflect the interpretations and viewpoint of its author. *This report should not be taken as representing an official statement of the position of Bob Jones University.* The University’s theological position is well expressed by its creed.

The staff of the Fundamentalism File would welcome any questions or comments concerning the content of this report.
The Reformed Baptists

Among the various Baptist groups in North America are what are called the “Sovereign Grace Baptists” or, more commonly, the “Reformed Baptists.” As their name indicates, this group combines historic Baptist beliefs with the tenets of Reformed theology. Yet even the label group may imply too much, for the Reformed Baptists are a loose alliance of like-minded Christians, not an organized body. Indeed, as will be seen, one segment of the movement has repudiated the label Reformed; “Sovereign Grace Baptists” may be, in fact, a more apt inclusive label. But the title Reformed Baptist still seems to be more generally recognized. This diverse movement is best understood only by generalizations rather than a list of hard distinctives. But its influence is undeniable.

Calvinism and the Baptists

Reformed Baptists normally highlight the Calvinistic heritage of the Baptists. English Baptists in the seventeenth century, the ancestors of the large majority of American Baptists today, generally fell into one of two groups. The General Baptists were Arminian in tendency, their very name reflecting their belief in a general atonement, that is, that Christ died for the sins of all humanity. The Particular Baptists were Calvinistic, their name referring to their belief in particular redemption, that is, that Christ died for the purpose of redeeming His elect.

Both Arminian and Calvinistic tendencies have been present among the Baptists throughout their history, with those of both persuasions sometimes accusing the other side of not reflecting the true Baptist heritage. The Reformed Baptists understandably stress the Calvinistic aspect of Baptist history and often view themselves as preserving or reestablishing the historic Baptist position. They note, for example, that the framers of the earliest major Baptist confessions—the London Confession (1689) and the Philadelphia Confession (1742)—modeled those confessions closely on the Reformed Westminster Confession of Faith.2

Writers have spilled much ink on claims and counterclaims about the role of Calvinism in Baptist history. Neither side is likely to establish its position as the truth, because both Calvinistic and Arminian tendencies have been present throughout Baptist history. The nineteenth century, for example, saw the growth in America of two contrasting groups, the Arminian Free Will Baptists and the rigorously Calvinistic Primitive Baptists. The Primitive Baptists eventually fell into fatalistic forms of hyper-Calvinism. Baptist seminaries, especially in the South, preserved a more scholarly approach to Calvinism. The modern “Reformed Baptist” movement, however, is of twentieth-century vintage, a product primarily of the post–World War II era.

Rise of the Reformed Baptist Movement

There are two sources to the Reformed Baptist stream in America; one is distinctly American and the other, dominantly British.

Rolfe Barnard and the Ashland Conference

One factor in the growth of “sovereign grace” teaching among American Baptists is the ministry of Rolfe P. Barnard (1904-69), who came to Calvinistic views during his ministry as a Southern Baptist pastor, evangelist, and military chaplain. When he began teaching at Piedmont Bible College in the 1940s, Barnard began moving in Fundamentalist circles. However, when Barnard expressed his Calvinistic beliefs at a conference sponsored by The Sword of the Lord in Toccoa, Georgia, in 1950, John R. Rice denounced him, and many Fundamentalist churches then closed their doors to him. Nonetheless, Barnard found other churches receptive to his views. A series of successful special meetings held by Barnard in Ashland, Kentucky, led to the founding in 1954 of the “Sovereign Grace Bible Conference” in Ashland. Located at the 13th Street Baptist Church in that city under the direction of Henry Mahan, a pastor influenced by Barnard, this annual conference became a force for the Sovereign Grace movement among the Baptists.5

British Influence

Paralleling the Sovereign Grace movement born in Ashland was the import of a British
revival of Calvinism. Although British Baptist (and Calvinist) C. H. Spurgeon (1834-92) serves as an inspiration to this movement, the real forerunner was probably A. W. Pink (1886-1952). Born in Britain, he became a Baptist minister and served churches in Britain, the United States, and Australia. Pink began originally as an adherent of American Fundamentalism, but through reading various Reformed and Puritan writers he became a convinced Calvinist. Pink became a prolific writer, noted for works such as *The Sovereignty of God* and *The Life of Elijah* and for his periodical *Studies in the Scripture*.6

Pink was little known in his own time, but his works were rediscovered during the revival of interest in Puritan studies sparked by British Bible expositor D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981) in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Finding his own study enriched by reading the Puritans, Lloyd-Jones aroused fresh interest in Puritan writings. His own preaching at Westminster Chapel in London and the publication of his sermons were partly responsible for this surge of interest. In addition, he sponsored annual conferences in Puritan studies that grew steadily in popularity and attendance, and he strongly supported efforts such as those of the Banner of Truth Trust in Britain to republish Puritan works.7

Lloyd-Jones was himself a Congregationalist, but he found a ready audience among many Baptists. British Baptists were obviously most likely to be influenced by him,8 but American Baptists also acknowledged his impact. Ron McKinney, one of the participants in the Reformed Baptist movement in America, said in 1982 that he credited Lloyd-Jones’s preaching, along with the publishing efforts he inspired, with encouraging this “resurgence” of Calvinism.9

**The Carlisle Conference**

The effects of this Puritan revival were eventually felt in America. The starting point for this movement in America was a meeting in 1966 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, sponsored by the Grace Baptist Church. This meeting evolved into an annual conference, soon joined by other conferences dedicated to Reformed teachings crossed with Baptist distinctives. Several churches in the Pennsylvania and New Jersey area that were associated with this meeting formed the Reformed Baptist Association. The leading representatives of this group were Walter Chantry of the Grace Baptist Church in Carlisle and Albert N. Martin of the Trinity Baptist Church in Essex Fells, New Jersey.10 Chantry became the literary spokesman for this group, notably through his controversial book *Today’s Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* which excoriated the “easy-believism” of modern evangelicalism and called for a return to a Calvinistic stress on the preaching of the law in order to bring conviction and repentance.11 Martin provided an eloquent voice to the movement through his persuasive preaching in churches and Bible conferences.

**Reformed Baptist Organizations and Institutions**

Around these two groups—Barnard’s Ashland conference and the Carlisle conference representing Lloyd-Jones’s influence—grew an array of institutions dedicated to Reformed Baptist ideals. A voice of the movement, more closely tied to the Ashland group, was the periodical *Baptist Reformation Review* founded in 1972 and edited first by Norbert Ward, a layman who worked as a sound engineer for CBS Records, and then by Jon Zens, who later changed its name to *Searching Together*.12 Another influential periodical was *Sword and Trowel* (named for a British periodical published by C. H. Spurgeon and his successors) published by Ron McKinney.

Martin, seeing a need for ministerial training from the Reformed Baptist perspective, founded the Trinity Ministerial Academy in 1977, a ministerial training institution that did not grant degrees and sought to concentrate on education geared exclusively to preparation for the ministry.13 Discount book distributors, such as Martin’s Trinity Book Service and the Cumberland Valley Bible Book Service, began to offer Reformed titles at only a little above cost to facilitate the spread of Reformed ideas. An international rallying point was established in 1991 when British Baptist Erroll Hulse, publisher of *Reformation Today*, led in the formation of the International Fellowship of Reformed Baptists.14

Walter Chantry in particular promoted interchurch organizations and associations. His group first organized the Reformed Baptist Missionary Services to provide a missionary outreach for the movement. A further step was the formation of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of
America in 1997 with its headquarters in Lafayette, New Jersey. This association united twenty-four churches in fourteen states, and in 1999 took the Reformed Baptist Missionary Services under its umbrella. The ARBCA in turn supported the formation of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies in connection with Westminster Theological Seminary in California in 1998. All of these persons, conferences, and agencies combined to form a loose network for Reformed Baptists in America.

Reformed Baptist Distinctives

Doctrinally, Reformed Baptists are almost uniformly Calvinistic in soteriology, adhering to the traditional “five points” of Calvinism. But within this overall Calvinistic belief, there is a diversity of opinion on lesser points. Often, these differences result from a tension between what is traditionally viewed as Reformed teaching and what is traditionally thought of as Baptist teaching. These differences have in fact created splits in the movement.

Polity is an example of such a tension. Some hold to the idea of a plurality of elders leading the church, with the pastor serving as the teaching elder. Deacons, in this system, are usually a rank of church officer below the elders. Other Calvinistic Baptists, following the pattern generally observed among American Baptists, tend more toward a church leadership consisting of a pastor and deacons. A few have moved to a loose, informal structure resembling that of the Quakers or one of the Anabaptist groups.

Eschatology represents a point of tension between traditional Reformed thought and modern American evangelical views of prophecy. Many Reformed Baptists are staunchly amillennial, considering that view more consistent with the Reformed system. Other Calvinistic Baptists, however, particularly those influenced by dispensationalism, hold to a premillennial view, although sometimes without dispensationalist characteristics such as the distinction between Israel and the church.

Baptist particularism is another issue. Baptists have historically been slower to join in interdenominational efforts than other groups have been. In the early 1800s, for example, the Baptists formed a separate mission agency rather than work in cooperation with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Likewise, Landmarkism, a system holding to the scriptural superiority of Baptist teachings, has influenced many Baptists to view with suspicion cooperation across denominational lines. Among some Reformed Baptists, these tendencies remain strong. Among others, however, especially those influenced by the British revival of Puritanism, there is more stress on cooperation with other Calvinists, regardless of whether they are Baptists.

Perhaps the major point rending the Reformed Baptist movement is the relationship of law and gospel, usually relating to the applicability of the Old Testament to Christians. Walter Chantry wrote God’s Righteous Kingdom (1980) to argue for the applicability of the moral law but not the civil and ceremonial law of Israel. In this Chantry represents the approach of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Banner of Truth, and related groups in stressing Puritan piety. Directly opposing him was the Christian Reconstruction movement that stressed the Puritan political vision.

A third option, however, repudiated the Puritan approach almost entirely. Led by Jon Zens in the early 1980s, some came to reject the term Reformed. Although remaining Calvinistic in soteriology, they embraced an Anabaptist view of the church. They rejected the traditional Reformed view of the transformation of culture and argued that the church should be a simple, egalitarian, spiritual body. Preferring the term Particular Baptist now, the advocates of this view sometimes sounded much like traditional Baptists and sometimes like Mennonites who held to the five points of Calvinism. They sometimes referred to their position as “new covenant theology” in contrast to Reformed covenant theology and dispensationalism.

Despite these differences, however, the Reformed Baptists hold enough in common to distinguish them from other Baptist groups. This distinctiveness is evident in some of the modern controversies arising over Calvinism among the Baptists.

Calvinism and Controversy

The revival of Calvinism in America caused some turmoil in Baptist circles, not all of which
was necessarily directly related to the Reformed Baptist movement described above (although there were often some links). The debates reached such a pitch that Fundamentalist George Dollar felt constrained to warn against “crusading Calvinism” in the 1970s.25

The GARBC Controversy

Part of the impetus for Dollar’s warning came from a conflict within the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches over Calvinistic teaching. The GARBC in the mid-1970s went through a process of clarifying its Articles of Faith to take into account issues that had arisen since their original adoption in 1932. All of the articles were accepted—except one on election.

The election article was written by Ernest Pickering, at that time president of Baptist Bible College in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. He did so at the request of David Nettleton, the president of Faith Baptist Bible College in Ankeny, Iowa, and a leading spokesman for those who wished to clarify the election article. Pickering warned Nettleton that he did not think anyone could write such an article in a manner that would be acceptable to the entire association, but he agreed to try. The disagreement over the article, as Pickering had cautioned, was strong and the GARBC eventually tabled it at a meeting at Winona Lake, Indiana, in 1975. A substitute motion—asking for a vote on the article as a “testimony” rather than a binding resolution—was turned aside in favor of a motion to drop the whole question.26

The Continental Baptists

It is unclear whether the Ashland and Carlisle groups had direct influence on this controversy, save as all are expressions of a revived interest in Calvinism. One of those involved in the GARBC dispute, Kenneth Good, wrote a book titled Are Baptists Calvinists? to which he answered yes. Later, however, he wrote a sequel Are Baptists Reformed? to which he answered no. Even Good, however, was fully cognizant of the contribution of the overtly Reformed groups. How those groups were blending and changing is seen in the formation of the Continental Baptist Churches.

The Continental Baptists were an outgrowth of three “Councils on Baptist Theology” that met in Dallas (1980-82). Sponsored by Ron McKinney, editor of The Sword and Trowel, these conferences followed lines similar to those being suggested by Jon Zens, stressing the Baptist/Anabaptist heritage against the overtly Reformed. When the formation of the Continental Baptists was announced, participants said that they were motivated not only by the stirrings of Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention and the GARBC but also by the GARBC’s apparent stand against Calvinism in the 1970s.27 Their outlook made them more sympathetic to dispensationalist thought, being Calvinistic primarily in soteriology, and perhaps smoothed the way for some Baptists in Fundamentalist circles (with their history of dispensationalist belief) to make the transition to an overtly Calvinistic position.

Yet the group was not able to claim great success. The Continental Baptists had only about twenty churches in the late 1980s.28 Furthermore, they were afflicted early in their history by a split. The Great Lakes Association of Baptist Churches left the Continental Baptists out of fears that the group did not properly safeguard the autonomy of the local church.29

The Founders Conference

Although the Continental Baptists drew some support from Southern Baptists, an even larger and more influential Reformed movement within the SBC has been the Southern Baptist Conference on the Faith of the Founders, or “Founders Conference.” This group, by its prominence if nothing else, has influenced other Baptists of Calvinistic/Reformed bent. The idea was born at a meeting in a motel in Euless, Texas, in 1982. Seven Southern Baptists with Calvinistic leanings formulated the idea of a conference to promote their views within the convention. The following year, the first Founders Conference was held, with participants including Jimmy A. Millikin, Thomas J. Nettles, Richard Belcher, Ernest Reisinger, and Thomas Ascol. As the name implies, this group asserted that in advocating a Reformed Baptist viewpoint they were returning to the position of the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention.30 Much of the literature emerging from this movement is dedicated to defending this idea of recovering the “lost” theology of the fathers of the SBC.31

The Founders Conference saw its influence grow not only through the appeal of its concepts to many Southern Baptists but also because of the
influential positions that many of its adherents gained within the SBC. Prominent leaders in the movement have included R. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Seminary; Thomas Nettles, professor of church history at that school; and Timothy George of Beeson Divinity School. Acceptance of the group’s agenda has been by no means complete. In addition to the resistance of some Baptists to Calvinism, the Calvinistic resurgence has coincided with (and many times supported) the “conservative take-over” of the Southern Baptist Convention. The result has sometimes been acrimonious dispute.  

Reformed Baptists and Fundamentalism

The Reformed Baptists and their offshoots are such a diverse group that it is impossible to make across-the-board generalizations about their relationship to Fundamentalism. Some Reformed Baptist churches consider themselves to be both Reformed and Fundamentalist. They work with non-Calvinistic Fundamentalist groups and send students from their churches to Fundamentalist schools. Furthermore, the staunch conservatism associated with orthodox Reformed theology often leads Reformed Baptists to take stands on theological issues that are similar to the Fundamentalist stance on those issues, such as opposition to the Charismatic movement.  

Views vary, however, among Reformed Baptists concerning the Fundamentalist hallmark of ecclesiastical separation. Mark McCulley is critical of Fundamentalism on many points but expresses appreciation for some aspects of its teaching on separation. He asks Calvinistic Baptists critical of Fundamentalism whether they think their movement should have “no doctrine of separation?” He states, “Particular Baptists need to be more ‘thankful’ for their ‘Fundamentalistic’ heritage. They need to learn and practice Scriptural separation today.”  

Other spokesmen have expressed displeasure with separatism. Walter Chantry chides Reformed Baptists for lacking concern for Christian unity. “We are heirs of the Reformed and Fundamentalist struggle against liberalism early in this century,” he says, a fact that “has left us with a disposition to separate from anyone who differs with us on any matters of conscience.” Chantry says, “We will associate only with those who agree with the vast majority of our convictions.” He calls it “arrogant” to assume “that our little group has got it just right, or at least far more so than all other Christians on the face of this earth from whom we separate.” For Chantry, “It is to be feared that we have become accustomed to separating and starting anew until we are hopelessly splintered and isolated.” Reformed Baptists, he argues, should confess their sins of “always beginning again” and “preferring tidy isolation.” He concludes, “Reformed Baptists do have something to contribute to the world-wide church if only they could unite with one another.”  

However they view separation, Reformed Baptists, when they address Fundamentalists, tend to offer reasons for dividing more than uniting. The commitment to Calvinism often leads them to establish Calvinistic teaching as the test of Christian fellowship. They criticize Fundamentalism for its toleration of Arminianism. Furthermore, their staunch affirmation of Reformed teaching colors their attitude toward those who do not hold to Calvinism. They often seem to judge non-Calvinists as harshly as they would a cult or heresy.  

On the other hand, Reformed Baptists do not always seem to Fundamentalists to be sufficiently sensitive to other theological matters when a person’s Calvinistic orthodoxy is unquestioned. There is a human tendency to overlook someone else’s shortcomings when he agrees on a dearly held belief. The Reformed Baptists are not immune from this disposition. For example, the keynote speaker a the 1999 Founders Conference was Minneapolis minister John Piper of the Baptist General Conference. Piper is unquestionably a Calvinist and an eloquent preacher, but he is also an advocate of “signs and wonders,” the Third Wave of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movements. Generally, Reformed Baptists personally oppose such practices, but the case of Piper suggests that these teachings seem to be no bar to fellowship. Fundamentalists might well ask why their toleration of Arminianism is an error, but Reformed Baptist toleration of Third Wave “signs and wonders” is not.  

Conclusion

In summary, the label Reformed Baptist encompasses a variety of views. The Reformed
Baptists are united in their adherence to Calvinistic theology, although they differ in their views of the details of that theology. They are clearly within the pale of orthodox Protestantism and espouse a complete rejection of liberalism. However, among the matters they disagree about is the question of ecclesiastical separation. On that matter, Fundamentalists must evaluate Reformed Baptists on a case-by-case basis, for no consensus exists among them either for or against the separatist position.

Notes


3A good example of such discussions is found in the Summer 1997 issue of The Founders Journal, a periodical dedicated to promoting Calvinism among Southern Baptists. William Estep, a well-known Baptist historian opposed to Calvinistic tendencies, condemns that theology in “Doctrines Lead to ‘Dunghill’ Prof Warns” (pp. 6-9). Replying to Estep in that issue were Tom Ascol, “Do Doctrines Really Lead to Dunghill?” (pp. 1-5); R. Albert Mohler, “The Reformation of Doctrine and the Renewal of the Church: A Response to Dr. William R. Estep” (pp. 10-13); and Roger Nicole, “An Open Letter to Dr. William R. Estep” (pp. 14-16). Note also the following companion articles in Baptist History and Heritage 31, no. 4 (1996): Thomas J. Nettles, “Southern Baptist Identity: Influenced by Calvinism,” pp. 17-26; W. Wiley Richard, “Southern Baptist Identity: Moving Away from Calvinism,” pp. 27-35. For a discussion outside the Southern Baptist context, see Kenneth H. Good, Are Baptists Calvinists? (Oberlin, Ohio: Regular Baptist Heritage Fellowship, 1975). One of the most exhaustive treatments, although from the Calvinistic viewpoint, is Thomas J. Nettles, By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).

4It is interesting to note that Norbert Ward, one of the leaders of the Reformed Baptist resurgence, was from a Primitive Baptist background but modified his stance because, as one observer put it, he thought that system “could not speak to the modern world” (McBeth, p. 773). For a modern Reformed Baptist view of the Primitive Baptists, see Scott, pp. 18-23.

5On Barnard and the Ashland group, see John Thornbury, “Evangelist Rolfe Barnard, 1904-1969,” Reformation Today, September-October 1978, pp. 2-13 (also published as the introduction to Sermons of Evangelist Rolfe Barnard, comp. Eulala Bullock [Greenville, S.C.: n.p.], 1982); John Thornbury, “The Bible Conference in Ashland,” Banner of Truth, September 1968, pp. 11-13; and Amy Greene, “Sovereign Grace Baptists’ Roots Are in Calvinistic Resurgence of ’50s,” Baptists Today, 18 October 1991, p. 3. There seems to be some dispute about the exact time and place of Barnard’s break with Rice; Thornbury puts it in “the late forties” at Greenville, Mississippi (“Evangelist Rolfe Barnard,” p. 11) and Nettles at Toccoa “Falls,” Georgia in 1949 (“Reformed Baptists,” p. 233). However, Barnard is listed as a speaker at a Sword conference in Toccoa, Georgia, in 1950 (advertisement, Sword of the Lord, 30 June 1950, p. 3; “Editor’s Notes,” Sword of the Lord, 28 July 1950, p. 5), and this is likely the occasion of the clash.


8See, e.g., Wayne A. Detzler, “Britons Wed Baptist Ecclesiology with Reformed Theology,” Christianity Today, 4 April 1980, pp. 50, 52, which describes the profound impact Lloyd-Jones was having on British Reformed Baptists at the end of his career.


10Mclnt, p. 490; McBeth, pp. 771-72.


24 See Fred Zaspel, New Covenant Theology and the Mosaic Law (Pottsville, Pa.: Word of Life Baptist Church, 1994); and Fred Zaspel, The Continuing Relevance of Divine Law (Hatfield, Pa.: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1991). It is not clear, however, whether this author considers himself part of the Reformed Baptist movement.


27 See “Calvinistic Baptists Ready to Organize,” p. 4; McBeth, pp. 772-73; McCulley, pp. 24-25; and Good, Are Baptists Reformed? pp. 61-62.


31See the articles by Tom Nettles, Timothy George, R. Albert Mohler, and Ernest C. Reisinger in Founders Journal, Winter/Spring 1995; Nettles, By His Grace and for His Glory; and Robert B. Selph, Southern Baptists and the Doctrine of Election (Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle, 1988).

32An overview of the dispute is found in Pamela H. Long, “Southern Baptists Debating Calvinism’s Influence,” Baptists Today, 20 November 1997, p. 4. Note also the materials cited in note 3 from William Estep and the responses to Estep for an example of the sometimes heated level at which the dispute is conducted.


34McCulley, pp. 41, 43.


