

CHARISMATIC CALVINISM:
A FRESH BLEND OF DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

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CHARISMATIC CALVINISM: A FRESH BLEND OF DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

Introduction

Charismatic Calvinists: even sympathetic authors have expressed surprise at this combination.¹ Historically, most Calvinists have been cessationists and most Charismatics have been Arminians. Yet it should not come as a great surprise that this belief-practice set seems anomalous: continuationism as it appears today is only one hundred years old and rose to popularity during a period of time where Arminianism held the floor in evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Until its recent resurgence, Calvinism enjoyed its period of prominence before the “waves” of Pentecostalism and Charismatism swept through evangelical Christianity. Perhaps onlookers should marvel instead that it actually took several decades for the two theologies to merge.² In the last 20 years, Charismatic Calvinism has been furthered rapidly by the work of a pastor, a church network, and a textbook.

John Piper: Pastor

Biography

Raised in Greenville, SC, John Piper is the son of a traveling evangelist. He studied literature and philosophy at Wheaton College and went on to earn a

¹ Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless and Reformed* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 98.

² This paper will not undertake a biblical evaluation of the two doctrinal systems, but will be limited to a survey of their presence, prominence, compatibility.

Bachelor of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Theology degree from the University of Munich.³

After teaching at Bethel College in St. Paul, Piper has served as the senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN, since 1980. Through *Desiring God Ministries*, his books and sermons are available worldwide. Piper's two most influential teachers are Dan Fuller of FTS and Jonathan Edwards. The theology of Edwards shines clearly through much of Piper's writing.

Piper's animated and passionate preaching have made him a much-sought-after speaker. He has spoken at Passion Conferences, *Desiring God Conference for Pastors*, Ligonier National Conferences, Next conferences, *Shepherds' Conferences*, *Together for the Gospel*, and *Evangelical Theological Society*.⁴

Calvinism

The first and foremost distinctive of John Piper's ministry is his explicit focus on the glory of God. He opens *The Pleasures of God* with a quotation from Henry Scougal: "The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love."⁵ Piper maintains that the things in which God delights are the things in which Christians must also delight. Since God's highest delight and pursuit is his own glory, the highest delight and pursuit of Christians should be God's glory.⁶ When Piper discusses missions, he does so in terms of the spread of

³ *Desiring God*, "Extended Biography," <http://www.desiringgod.org/AboutUs/JohnPiper/ExtendedBiography/> (accessed December 9, 2009).

⁴ *Desiring God*, "John Piper's Speaking Schedule," <http://www.desiringgod.org/Events/SpeakingSchedule/> (accessed December 9, 2009).

⁵ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2000), 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

God's glory.⁷ When he defends justification, he does so in terms of God's commitment to his own glory.⁸ When he writes about marriage, he does so in terms of God's glory.⁹ When he teaches about fasting, he does so in terms of God's glory.¹⁰ To identify the central hub of John Piper's theology, one needs look no farther than the glory of God.

It would be nearly impossible to imagine anything but Calvinism flowing from Piper's view of God. The self-sufficient, self-delighting, self-satisfied God to whom Piper passionately draws attention is a sovereign, wise and powerful God. Election, irresistible grace, and perseverance could have no other source. Though not young himself, John Piper could very well be labeled "the pipeline of New Calvinism." Hansen contends that "Piper is the chief spokesman for the Calvinist resurgence among young evangelicals"¹¹ and that "without Piper's infusion of zeal, [it is doubtful that] Calvinism would have recaptured the affection of young evangelicals."¹²

One of Piper's most powerful statements of his joy in the doctrines of God's election and predestination is the fifth chapter of *The Pleasures of God*: "The Pleasure of God in Election."¹³ He clearly writes that God's election of saints is an

⁷ Ibid., 109ff.

⁸ John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), 69.

⁹ John Piper, *This Momentary Marriage* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009), 30.

¹⁰ John Piper, *A Hunger for God*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 21.

¹¹ Hansen, 29.

¹² Ibid., 34.

¹³ John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2000), 121-55.

individual election, not the generic “election of Christ.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the sovereign election of God goes hand-in-glove with the sovereign, effective call to salvation that God gives to His chosen people.¹⁵ This gracious election and calling form the sole foundation of hope for sinners who have no ability to meet God’s holy demands.¹⁶ These sinners are redeemed through Christ’s atoning death: an atonement that applies specifically to “sinners *who trust Christ*.”¹⁷ That redemption is eternal; therefore, those who are elect never fall away from faith.¹⁸ If the five points of Calvinism are not clear enough as Piper weaves through *The Pleasures of God*, he explains and affirms them fully in an article in a 1985 article posted by his church staff at Bethlehem Baptist.¹⁹

Charismatism

John Piper has preached and taught consistently that all the spiritual gifts are valid today. In a 1981 sermon, he included healing and miracles in a list of spiritual gifts that congregants potentially might exercise.²⁰ Three years later, he surveyed his congregation about their views of spiritual gifts. The following

¹⁴ Ibid., 137.

¹⁵ Ibid., 141-42.

¹⁶ Ibid., 150.

¹⁷ Ibid., 163 (emphasis added).

¹⁸ Ibid., 144.

¹⁹ Bethlehem Baptist Church Staff, “What We Believe about the Five Points of Calvinism,” Desiring God Resource Library, entry posted on March 1, 1985, revised March, 1998, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/resources/what-we-believe-about-the-five-points-of-calvinism> (accessed December 8, 2010).

²⁰ John Piper, “Spiritual Gifts,” Desiring God Resource Library, entry posted March 15, 1981, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/spiritual-gifts> (accessed December 6, 2010).

table displays the results of that survey. While 15-25% of the congregation was unsure about the answer to any given question, the trend is clear. At that time, most of Bethlehem Baptist Church's congregation believed that miraculous spiritual gifts are currently available to the church. He does not give any evidence of abuse, but six years later, Piper cautioned his church about the potential danger of emotional instability and insecurity in the exercise of certain spiritual gifts.²¹

Question	Yes	No	Maybe
Do you believe the Bible teaches that the gift of tongues was to end at the close of the New Testament times?	7%	73%	20%
Have you ever spoken in tongues?	16%	84%	—
Do you believe that the Bible teaches that the gift of prophecy was to end at the close of New Testament times?	9%	74%	17%
Do you think you have the gift of prophecy?	2%	77%	21%
Do you believe the Bible teaches that the gift of miraculous healing by God was to end at the close of the New Testament times?	4%	91%	5%
Do you think you have a gift for healing?	1%	74%	25%

Source: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/testing-bethlehems-charismatic-quotient>

To understand accurately Piper's continuationism, an examination of his definitions is helpful. He defines the gift of prophecy as

“a regulated message or report in human words usually made to the gathered believers based on a spontaneous, personal revelation from the Holy Spirit for the purpose of edification, encouragement, consolation, conviction or guidance but not necessarily free from a mixture of human

²¹ John Piper, “Why Some Spiritual Gifts Attract Unstable People,” Desiring God Resource Library, entry posted March 19, 1990, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/why-some-spiritual-gifts-attract-unstable-people> (accessed December 6, 2010).

error, and thus needing assessment on the basis of the apostolic (Biblical) teaching and mature spiritual wisdom."²²

Like Grudem, Piper emphasizes the need for evaluation of prophecy and differentiates it clearly from continued *revelation*. In a sense, this is not unlike the common cessationist practice of asking for "testimonies" in a worship or prayer service; the practical difference is that continuationists evaluate the prophecy / testimony before allowing public sharing.

In Piper's theology of spiritual gifts, signs and wonders are valid gifts today as well. In his 1991 article on these gifts, he simply states this belief at the outset and devotes the article to defending the congruity of the sign gifts and authoritative preaching and arguing that signs and wonders were not unique to the apostles.²³ He answers objections based on misused passages (Mt. 12.39), defends his understanding of the Paul's apostolic gift (II Cor. 12.11-12), and offers four reasons why signs and wonders were not exclusively apostolic. This raises the question, "Why don't we experience the miracles that the apostles were capable of?" Piper allows that some people do experience such miracles, but concludes that, through the miracles surrounding Christ's life, God "meant to signify that this point in history, this incarnation, this authoritative band of apostles was unique."²⁴

²² John Piper, "The New Testament Gift of Prophecy: Definition, Theses and Suggestions," Desiring God Resource Library, entry posted March 26, 1990, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/the-new-testament-gift-of-prophecy> (accessed December 6, 2010).

²³ John Piper, "Signs and Wonders: Then and Now," Desiring God Resource Library, entry posted February 1, 1991, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/signs-and-wonders-then-and-now> (accessed December 6, 2010).

²⁴ John Piper, "Why Don't We Experience the Miracles that the Apostles Were Capable of?" Desiring God Resource Library, entry posted December 19, 2009,

Regarding tongues, Piper has prayed to experience them, but has not spoken in tongues.²⁵ He does not see a problem with this unanswered prayer: he maintains his Calvinistic confidence in God's sovereignty in responding to prayer and distributing gifts.²⁶ As with the other miraculous spiritual gifts, Piper holds his convictions about tongues with a fair amount of graciousness and latitude, introducing his position with these words: "I will tell you what I do, whether it is the right thing or not. I'm not going to die on this hill, but I will tell you what I do."²⁷ He believes that the miraculous gifts are best suited for small group ministry, not corporate worship.²⁸

Summary

John Piper's Calvinistic credentials are unimpeachable. Standing on Edwards's shoulders, he preaches and teaches the doctrines of grace with a sphere of influence beyond that of any other pastor. At the same time, he also maintains that the so-called "sign gifts" of the Spirit were not unique to apostolic ministry and, thus, did not cease with the apostles' deaths. Though these beliefs

<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/why-dont-we-experience-the-miracles-that-the-apostles-were-capable-of> (accessed December 6, 2010).

²⁵ John Piper, "Have You Ever Seen a Vision or Spoken in Tongues?" Desiring God Resource Library, entry posted on March 27, 2010, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/have-you-ever-seen-a-vision-or-spoken-in-tongues> (accessed December 6, 2010).

²⁶ John Piper, "Spiritual Gifts: An Implication for Unanswered Prayer," Desiring God Resource Library, entry posted on April 7, 2010, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/spiritual-gifts-an-implication-for-unanswered-prayer> (accessed December 6, 2010).

²⁷ John Piper, "How Should Miraculous Gifts Be Used in the Church?" Desiring God Resource Library, entry posted on August 17, 2010, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/how-should-the-miraculous-gifts-be-ministered-in-the-church> (accessed December 6, 2010).

²⁸ Ibid.

have not often been historically concurrent, they both grow from Piper's firm confidence in the sovereignty of God. God sovereignly elects sinners to salvation; God sovereignly gives gifts through His Spirit.

Sovereign Grace Ministries: Church Network

Biographies

C. J. Mahaney came to Christ from a life of drugs and sin. He therefore quickly understood that God sovereignly chose him to salvation.²⁹ Five years after his 1972 conversion, he was pastoring Covenant Life Church, Gaithersburg, Maryland. In 2004, he transferred that role to Joshua Harris so that he could devote his time to Sovereign Grace Ministries, a church planting and fellowship network.³⁰ Mahaney is one of the founding members of *Together for the Gospel*.³¹

Joshua Harris was living in Oregon and publishing a homeschool magazine called *New Attitude* before moving to Maryland in 1997. In Maryland, he took a pastoral internship at Covenant Life Church.³² He continued to fill various ministry roles at Covenant Life before taking the senior pastorate in 2004.

Calvinism

The core of Sovereign Grace's Calvinism appears immediately in the doctrinal statement posted on their website. Man is "subject to divine wrath, inwardly depraved and, apart from a special work of grace, utterly incapable of

²⁹ Hansen, 101.

³⁰ Sovereign Grace Ministries, "C. J. Mahaney," <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/About/LeadershipBios/CJBio.aspx> (accessed December 10, 2009).

³¹ Hansen, 107.

³² Sovereign Grace Ministries, "Joshua Harris," <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/About/LeadershipBios/JoshHarris.aspx> (accessed December 10, 2009).

returning to God.”³³ The return to God made by believers “is rooted and grounded in the free and unconditional election of God for his own pleasure and glory.”³⁴ A reformed theology of salvation forms the key link between C. J. Mahaney and the other *Together for the Gospel* leaders, who are all cessationist: Al Mohler, Mark Dever, and Ligon Duncan. Mahaney’s own colorful testimony is Calvinistic from his conversion: “Had you met me [the night of my conversion] and told me, ‘You responded, then God responded to your response,’ I would have said, ‘You’re an idiot.’”³⁵ Joshua Harris also ministers from a Calvinistic perspective. In his recent book, *Dug Down Deep*, he writes that “before God does this [regenerative] work in us, we don’t possess the inner desire to believe in him, seek him, repent of sin, or genuinely pray for salvation.”³⁶

Charismatism

Mahaney and the other SGM leaders recognize the excesses and abuses that many in the Charismatic movement have embraced and are quick to distance themselves from the extremes. They do not elevate public tongues-speaking in church, choosing instead to emphasize the more edifying gift of prophecy. Prophecies are evaluated and approved by leadership before being delivered to the congregation. Prominent leaders like Joshua Harris claim to

³³ Sovereign Grace Ministries, “What We Believe,” <http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/about-us/what-we-believe.aspx> (accessed December 8, 2010).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Hansen, 101.

³⁶ Joshua Harris, *Dug Down Deep* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2010), 131.

speak in tongues,³⁷ and even pastors who do not speak in tongues still believe that Scripture instructs the church to pursue all gifts, including tongues.³⁸

One Sovereign Grace church planter clarifies the label “charismaticism.” Because it evokes a negative reaction in some Christian circles, he finds the label “continuationist” to be more accurate and conducive to conversation and fellowship. He offered two important distinctions between his theology and theologies often held in broader Pentecostalism and Charismaticism. First, he does not believe in the universality of tongues. Tongues are not a necessary, normative marker of either salvation or Spirit baptism.³⁹ Second, he maintains that the baptism of the Spirit occurs simultaneously with conversion; it is not chronologically subsequent from conversion.

Not all Sovereign Grace churches hold to these beliefs, however. The official SGM doctrinal statement establishes continuationism by stating that “all the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church of the first century are available today,” but does not mandate positions regarding the universality of tongues or the subsequence of Spirit baptism.⁴⁰ In 2002, SGM modified their statement of faith regarding the Holy Spirit in order to create more theological latitude for Charismatics in the third-wave camp. In his article explaining the alteration, SGM Pastors College dean Jeff Purswell holds to this line of demarcation:

³⁷ Ibid., 184.

³⁸ Jim Britt, interview by author, Greenville, SC, December 1, 2010.

³⁹ Britt, interview. In twenty-years of SGM leadership, he has only heard one attempt at tongues-speaking and the presiding pastor (Joshua Harris) graciously and kindly requested that the speaker come to the front to speak with an elder and minister via microphone. The speaker did not take that opportunity.

⁴⁰ “What We Believe.”

“Our statement would not accommodate a cessationist perspective on spiritual gifts. Although we love, respect, and affirm genuine brothers and sisters in Christ who are cessationists, the entailments of this view for life, ministry, and practice within the context of the local church would simply make laboring closely together in the context of a local church impracticable.”⁴¹

In spite of Gospel-centered, conference-based cooperation with cessationists, SGM understands the practical ramifications of overseeing a congregation with mixed views.

Summary

Sovereign Grace churches are firmly established in the belief that God sovereignly chooses, calls, saves, and keeps unworthy sinners. They also believe that those sinners are gifted for ministry with all the same gifts available in the first century. When asked about a theological connection between Calvinism and continuationism, pastor Jim Britt offered “the sovereignty of God” as a point of consistency. In his view, all ministry is risk: personal evangelism, worldwide missions, exercise of spiritual gifts. God’s sovereignty is what gives him and his church confidence to pursue those ministries in spite of their human weaknesses and falterings.⁴² The same sovereignty that brings broken sinners to salvation also enables broken sinners to perform God’s ministry in the church and world.

Wayne Grudem’s Systematic Theology: Textbook

Biography

Theologian Wayne Grudem holds degrees from Harvard (B.A.), Westminster (M.Div.), and Cambridge (Ph.D.). He taught at Trinity Evangelical

⁴¹ Jeff Purswell, “Empowered by the Spirit: Room for Differing Views,” http://sovereigngraceministries/Reference/holy_spirit.pdf/ (accessed December 10, 2009), 9.

⁴² Britt, interview.

Divinity School for two decades and currently serves as a research professor at Phoenix Seminary.⁴³ His *Systematic Theology* could be considered the primary systematic theology of conservative evangelicalism. It comes with recommendations from J. I. Packer, Paige Patterson, John Piper, Vern Poythress, Robert Saucy, and others.⁴⁴ Grudem's *Systematic Theology* is squarely Calvinistic and continuationist.

Calvinism

Grudem first mentions God's sovereign control over the salvation of men in his chapter on divine providence.⁴⁵ He fleshes this doctrine out more fully in subsequent chapters. Chapter 24 discusses man's depravity, concluding that "we lack the ability to do anything that will in itself please God and the ability to come to God in our own strength."⁴⁶ Chapter 32 examines the doctrine of election, demonstrating that God chooses individuals to salvation based on his pleasure, not human faith.⁴⁷ Chapter 27 covers the atonement, affirming the Reformed belief that "Christ died for particular people..., that he foreknew each one of them individually (cf. Eph. 1:3-5) and had them individually in mind in his atoning work."⁴⁸ Chapter 33 presents irresistible grace, defining *effective calling* as "an act of God the Father, speaking through the human proclamation of

⁴³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, 1994), back cover.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, front matter.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 497.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 675-77.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 596.

the gospel, in which he summons people to himself in such a way that they respond in saving faith.”⁴⁹ In Chapter 40, Grudem writes that “all who are truly born again will persevere to the end.”⁵⁰ All five points of Calvinism are visibly present in Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*.

Charismatism

Like points of his Calvinism, Grudem’s continuationism appears in multiple places throughout his *Systematic Theology*. Since non-apostles performed miracles in the first century, he concludes that miraculous gifts were not for apostles alone and, therefore, not limited to the first century.⁵¹ In the category of “miraculous” gifts, he includes prophecy, casting out demons, and tongues.⁵²

Grudem gives significant attention to the gift of prophecy. He avoids putting prophecy in competition with revelation by specifying that prophecy is less authoritative than Scripture and must be subject to evaluation.⁵³ Prophecy is a human report of a divine “revelation” (in the non-technical sense). Because of its human component, prophecy is spontaneous and may be in error.⁵⁴

Piper and Sovereign Grace leadership do not often define the gift of tongues; Grudem also maintains a degree of generality. He allows that tongues can be either human language or entirely unknown speech.⁵⁵ He restricts

⁴⁹ Ibid., 693.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 789.

⁵¹ Ibid., 363-65.

⁵² Ibid., 1027.

⁵³ Ibid., 1039-40, 1049-62.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1056-57.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1072.

tongues, however, to Godward usage (prayer or praise) only and believes that the one speaking does not understand them.⁵⁶

Summary

Grudem's Calvinism is unmistakable in his *Systematic Theology*, and his firm continuationism reaches much of evangelicalism through this book's prominence. Unlike Piper and SGM, he does not offer any clear connecting link between Calvinism and continuationism: only his foundational belief that the Bible teaches both.

Conclusion

Charismatic and Calvinism have not long co-existed, but their current combination is both powerful and popular. The two doctrines are not logically incompatible; they have been separated primarily by chronology, not theology. The unifying belief that drives both systems together is confidence in God's sovereignty. His sovereignty in salvation is Calvinism's soteriological trademark. His sovereignty in His Church is continuationism's comfort during the apparent lack of sign gifts and its confidence to exercise all its gifts without timidity.

Charismatic Calvinism as promoted by Piper, SGM, and Grudem represents, in many ways, a theological and practical maturation from classic Pentecostalism and Charismaticism. Instead of being relegated to the fringes of experiential Christianity, continuationism has now found its place in mainstream evangelical ministry and education. Though this survey has not undertaken an exegetical evaluation of the biblical accuracy of the Calvinist or continuationist systems, the evidence presented does demonstrate their logical compatibility.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1070.

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