

Reaching Today's World Through Differing Views of Election

**Opening Comments by Dr. R. Albert Mohler Jr.
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Well, thank you, Dr. Wright and Dr. Patterson. It is a joy to be here and to welcome you this morning. We have discovered what will draw a crowd Monday morning at the SBC Pastors' Conference. This is a sign of health, brothers and sisters, that Southern Baptists would be discussing theology and doctrine. It is a sign of theological vitality and vibrancy and responsibility and maturity that a people of God would come together and say, "Let's talk about what the Gospel is."

I am here because of the invitation of Dr. Wright and because of my friendship with Dr. Patterson. And the genesis of this gets back to the fact that out of an incredible gift to my life of the friendship of Dr. Paige Patterson comes two decades of talking together, studying Scripture together, preaching the Gospel together. And so one way you could contextualize what we are doing here is two friends in the Gospel talking about how we come to understand the doctrine of election. And yet a sense of indebtedness leads me to say that we would not be having this conversation were it not for the fact that Dr. Paige Patterson and others put their lives on the line for the recovery of biblical authority and inerrancy in this denomination. Had the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention not taken place, a crowd this size might have been drawn together on a Monday morning of the Southern Baptist Convention to debate the ordination of homosexuals. There but by the grace of God go we. As other denominations are gathering crowds to debate what should be undebatable, here we are to discuss, not to debate, but to discuss among friends how we understand the doctrine of election.

Also, in the context of my sense of what we're doing here is the fact that I know Dr. Paige Patterson as a theologian. And as a young theologian in the midst of the SBC controversy, I came to know his heart and his mind most emphatically through hearing his debate on the substitutionary atonement, which he defended in such a clear way, the substitutionary character, the non-negotiable, indispensable, essential, central substitutionary character of Christ's atonement. And there I saw the heart and mind of a theologian with whom I resonate with concern for the Gospel.

So we are here to talk theology. We're here to talk doctrine. I am here to define and defend and disseminate the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is our Christian responsibility. I am not here to defend Calvinism, although within the context of this discussion, I am a Calvinist. If asked the question, "Are you now or have you ever been a Calvinist?" the answer would be yes. If you're counting points—five. But when I wake up in the morning, I do not check points in the mirror. I want to check my heart to preach the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a conversation among close friends. This has happened in the history of the church before – how persons who differ on even the doctrine of election can work

together in evangelism. You think especially of the partnership of George Whitefield and John Wesley, and you understand how they together preaching the Gospel of the new birth helped to awaken so many souls to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. They differed on this issue sometimes to the point of some difficulty between them, but never to the point of breaking their friendship and never to the point of compromising their ministry. It became an issue for them that helped the one to define biblical truth in conversation with the other. Similarly, and even closer to our context, you think of the partnership between Charles Spurgeon and D. L. Moody, of Spurgeon welcoming Moody to his pulpit at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, and you understand how they could work together because of their common concern for the Gospel.

We as Southern Baptists gathered here in this room are pretty close together on these issues, and in fact more Calvinist than non-Calvinist from the very beginning. Just take four issues as signs among us: Number one, our affirmation of the inerrancy of Scripture. There is no great Arminian defense of the inerrancy of Scripture, because it doesn't fit within that theological scheme in terms of the logic. We are those who believe that the sovereign God who created the universe speaks through Scripture. We also believe that every single word of Scripture is exactly what God intended it to be. That means that we believe that God inspired the authors of sacred Scripture to such an extent that God's will worked within them such that they willed to write exactly what the Spirit willed without ever contravening their will. Now we don't refer to Paul as being irresistibly inspired because we understand that inspiration explains why Paul was led of the Spirit to desire to write exactly what the Father wanted him to write.

This is a conversation among friends because of our affirmation of the substitutionary atonement. We believe that something actually took place on the cross, that sinners were saved. We don't believe that it was merely the down payment for a potentiality. We believe that it was the reality of God saving sinners. Again the very logic of substitution only makes sense within a generalized, Calvinist understanding.

We are also close together because we affirm, as the *Baptist Faith and Message* so importantly affirms, the absolute and unconditional omniscience of God.

Just to let you know, I had corneal surgery yesterday, and that's why my eyes are closed, and that's why I cannot see my notes. So if you will bear with me, I am going to take the invitation of Dr. Wright and play the part of the Blues Brothers. If I can just recover for a moment here. I can't do that either.

We are together because of our affirmation of the omniscience of God. Which means at the very least, at the very least all of us in this room insofar as we affirm the *Baptist Faith and Message* understand that before the creation of the world God at the very least knew who would come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Such that at the very least we believe that there is no surprise in the mind of God in a person's response to the Gospel. There are many of us who believe more than that, but none of us believe less than that.

We are also together because of our affirmation of perseverance, which some might phrase as the security of the believer. We believe that once that work of salvation has begun, genuinely, authentically begun in the life of an individual, of a sinner, it will be completed, not because of that sinner's faithfulness, but because of God's purpose to save.

So this is a conversation among close friends. It is not a conversation among Calvinists and Arminians. We could have that discussion if we invited Arminians. But this is not the assumption of what is going on here today, nor would I ever misconstrue Dr. Paige Patterson as either an Arminian or, as emails and the blogs often misspell, an Armenian. He is neither.

We are also here today as close friends because of our history. It was indeed out of the Particular Baptist tradition that we were born. It is indeed persons who held the strong understanding of God's electing purpose of the doctrine of election and the doctrines of grace that brought this denomination into being and formed it as a great missionary body. It was out of that history that someone who held to a Calvinist understanding, in particular William Carey, was led to begin the great missionary movement that has led down to the modern day. It is true that the main stream of our denominational heritage has pointed us in this direction and has fed us through centuries of development. Now, this is because we share an affirmation of how the *Baptist Faith and Message* affirms God's election: It is God's gracious purpose to save sinners through the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me just dispel a couple of misimpressions. Let me deny that a couple of persons exist. Number one, I do not believe that anyone is drawn to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ against his will. Now I affirm all five points of Calvinism, but let me just tell you that those five points were defined in a defensive mode, and I would much prefer to define them in terms of what I see as the biblical presentation. I believe in effectual calling. Once that work of salvation begins in the heart of a person, that person will come to faith in Christ, will profess faith in Christ, and will show the fruit of authentic belief, the signs of regeneration. But I do not believe that there is any person who is irresistibly drawn, that is to say that he would not want to come to Christ, but against his will is drawn to Christ. No – no more than the Apostle Paul was irresistibly inspired.

I also do not believe in a person who would will to receive Christ who is denied salvation. That person does not exist. Without any hesitation, equivocation, I preach to whosoever is in the "alls." Whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. I want to follow the model of the Apostle Paul who preached, who used persuasion, who preached promiscuously, that is he shared the Gospel with all persons everywhere. He was eager to preach the Gospel, to defend the Gospel.

My purpose here is not to defend Calvinism, but as one who is appropriately called a Calvinist if you are looking for a place to place me in that scheme, I want to be very clear as I always am clear about my conviction. I am here also to tell you that there are dangers in any theological system. I believe in all five points of Calvinism, but I want to tell you

that there is a heresy called Hyper-Calvinism. Hyper-Calvinism denies the well-meant offer of the Gospel. That is to say the key issue is, can we, must we, do we share the Gospel with all persons, believing that if they profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ they will be saved? Yes we must. Anything less than that is not only ineffective, it is disobedient and it is heretical. Now Hyper-Calvinism is a small movement by definition. They do not reproduce very well, but where they are found they are to be defined as heretics.

Now there is a different form, and often this is misconstrued. You will hear people use the phrase Hyper-Calvinism where it doesn't apply, where they really mean Calvinists who are hyperactive. That is another problem. There are some Calvinists who would rather talk about Calvinism than about the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. There are some who will drive across the state to debate the five points of Calvinism when they haven't crossed the street to share the Gospel. That is not true of the vast mainstream, but where it is found we bear responsibility as Calvinists to say that too is an unhealthy, unbiblical Calvinism – the debating tendency that happens among some of us. The positive side of that is that we believe doctrine is important. The negative side of that is that we can forget that the doctrine is to be well understood to the glory of God in order that we can preach the Gospel and get to the business.

There can also be a coldness that can affect some who believe that they understand the architecture of the Gospel without understanding the great purpose of the Gospel. Now that is not something that happens only among Calvinists. Look across the landscape of American religion and of Christianity through the centuries and you will see any number of persons. Just look at the baptismal statistics in our own denomination and you will see that there is widespread coldness and apathy. What we need is recovery of the Gospel.

Now when we talk about all these issues, we have to remember that in our very short compressed time today our purpose is to try to speak about how our understanding of the doctrine of election compels us forward in evangelism. And here is where I would wish to conclude my comments. I share the Gospel. I support the cause of world missions. I go and I send because I believe the Gospel actually saves. I believe that is rooted in the fact that before the foundation of the world God sovereignly decreed and chose to elect salvation and to elect a saved people, and that they do respond by grace. I do not believe that the atonement is only about a potentiality, but it's about an actuality. Now why do we go? We go because we honestly believe that whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. We go because we honestly believe that the same Apostle Paul who wrote Romans chapter eight telling us about how the Gospel works and the order of salvation, and the same Apostle Paul who gave us Romans chapter nine about God's electing purpose and His sovereignty in salvation and in all other things is the same Apostle Paul who in Romans chapter ten writes that whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved and then goes through the logic, "How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? How will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent?" And then he concludes in verse seventeen, "So faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ." And then what do we read? We read as the Apostle Paul

preached that the Word of God prevailed in the book of Acts. And that's our confidence. God always blesses the preaching of the Gospel. And He does so because He is not a spectator, but because He is the God who saves through the means of the Gospel. It comes down to obedience or disobedience for all of us. Do we follow the command of God? Do we obey the command of God? Do we preach and teach the Gospel? The Scripture leaves us very few options, and that's one of the wonders of this inerrant and infallible Word of God. We have to make certain decisions. We have to make a decision about the identity of Christ. We have to make a decision as we understand this, an intellectual understanding about what the Gospel is and what it is not. We have to understand who the church is. We have to understand what God is doing in His purpose of salvation. And it all comes down to this. God acts in such a way that He brings the maximum glory unto Himself. And God glorifies Himself most supremely in the salvation of sinners. God delights in saving sinners through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. God commands that His church be the vessel of the Gospel and that we preach and teach the Gospel. And as the church we are pointed to the nations and we are told to let the nations rejoice, to let the nations be glad. The logic of the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter ten is the symphonic logic of the Gospel. Whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Dr. Patterson and I have discussed this far more extensively than a one-hour presentation here would allow. It's a part of the vibrancy of our friendship in the Gospel. We do bear a responsibility to each other as theologians, as preachers, as servants of this denomination, as theological educators to discuss these issues. Far more importantly, we owe it to each other as brothers in Christ who share an affection for the Gospel, in the sense of the call of the Gospel, to— as iron sharpens iron— talk about these issues so that we can be ever more faithful in preaching and teaching the Gospel. That is the purpose that has drawn us here. It is a privilege to be here with you today and with Dr. Patterson and with Dr. Wright and it is always a consummate privilege to be able to speak a word of testimony to the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and of the sovereign God who saves. Thank you so very much.