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## CALVINISM RESURGENCE AND WESTERN CUBA BAPTISTS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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*Editor's Note: If any readers would like to provide a response to this article that might be included in the next issue, they should contact the editor.*

### ***Abstract***

Church splits and denominational strife have resulted from the global resurgence of Calvinism and its impact in the Western Cuba Baptist Convention. That situation is affecting their fulfillment of the Great Commission. The outside influence of American Calvinists has added fuel to the new emphasis on Calvinism within the Cuban convention.

The resurgence of Calvinism is a current world trend. The New Calvinism is not only touching evangelicals in the US, among whom the movement emerged,<sup>1</sup> particularly in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), but also its influence has reached other countries. In this paper, the author will focus on the impact of the Calvinism resurgence in the

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1 Brad Vermurlen, "Reformed Resurgence: A Field-Theoretic Analysis of Religious Strength (and Weakness) in Advanced Modernity" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2016), 58.

Western Cuba Baptist Convention (WCBC). The purpose of the research is not to discuss theology or define whose doctrine is right or wrong, but to analyze how the resurgence of the Calvinist doctrine is impacting the Baptists in Western Cuba. This paper will assert that the Calvinism resurgence is negatively affecting the fulfillment of the Great Commission in the WCBC.

To accomplish this goal, the writer will first define the term Calvinism as used in this paper and present the resurgence of this doctrine. Later, the author will portray a historical perspective of Calvinism in the WCBC and its current upsurge. Finally, he will assess the effect of this situation in the fulfillment of the Great Commission in the WCBC.

## INTRODUCTION

Calvinism is a broad concept, with several implications. It refers in general to the theological system that John Calvin developed. However, the term Calvinism commonly points to a particular way of understanding soteriology, the biblical doctrine of salvation. Even Calvinist soteriology has a broad spectrum, but this paper will focus on what some scholars refer to as Dortian Calvinism or five-point Calvinism. Many of those who hold this position consider that if one does not accept all of the five points, he is not a true Calvinist.<sup>2</sup>

The debate about soteriological issues is ancient. It started with the Bishop of Carthage, Augustine of Hippo, more than one thousand years before John Calvin was born. During the Reformation, Calvin popularized the position defended by Augustine in his controversy with Pelagius. Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* has been highly influential in spreading Augustine's ideas. The author that Calvin quotes the most in the *Institutes*, after the Bible, is precisely the Bishop of Carthage.

After the Reformation, Calvinism experienced ups and downs, but in the twenty-first century, it is resurging among evangelical leaders and

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<sup>2</sup> Steve W. Lemke, "History or Revisionist History? How Calvinistic Were the Overwhelming Majority of Baptists and Their Confessions in the South until the Twentieth Century?" *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 57, no. 2 (2015): 229-32.

particularly Baptists.<sup>3</sup> Young people especially seem to be attracted to this movement.<sup>4</sup> Tom Ascol states that “Calvinism is arguably the most important issue that confronts Southern Baptists in the early years of the twenty-first century.”<sup>5</sup> More remarkably, in 2009, *Time* magazine included “The New Calvinism” as the third of ten trends shaping the world today.<sup>6</sup>

Defenders and detractors of this movement commonly refer to it as the “New Calvinism.”<sup>7</sup> Kevin DeYoung, an enthusiastic supporter, defines the movement this way: “The New Calvinism is a resurgence of Reformed theology, mainly in soteriology. . . . Mainly it is a new sense, especially among young people, that God’s sovereignty is biblical and massively important.”<sup>8</sup> Some prefer the term Neo-Calvinism, but technically that category denotes a different movement developed in the Dutch Reformed tradition in the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

The New Calvinism consistently employs technology to promote its ideas. Vermurlen affirms that “New Calvinism is at least as much an ‘online movement’ as it is a flesh and blood movement” and for that reason, “it is a distinctly twenty-first-century religious phenomenon. It simply would not have emerged as it did without the Internet.”<sup>10</sup> New Calvinists frequently take advantage of all the modern ways of communication available to promote their ideas, such as digital literature (and hard copy), videos,

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3 Vermurlen, “Reformed Resurgence;” Keith D. Stanglin, “Southern Baptist Anti-Calvinism and Eternal Security: Some Critical Questions for Dialogue,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 17 (Spring 2014): 19, 20, 23; E. Ray Clendenen and Brad J. Waggoner, eds., *Calvinism: A Southern Baptist Dialogue* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2008), 9, 13, 15; Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 13-16.

4 Roger Olson, “The Calvinist Youth Movement,” *Religion in the News* (Fall 2013): 10-12; Collin Hansen, “Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism Is Making a Comeback – and Shaking Up the Church,” *Christianity Today* (September 2006): 32-38.

5 Tom Ascol, “Working Together to Make Christ Known: Considerations for the Future,” in Clendenen and Waggoner, 262.

6 Michael Horton, *For Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 15, referring to David Van Biema, “The New Calvinism,” *Time*, 23 March 2009, 50.

7 The accepted use of that term is evident in Vermurlen’s research quoted several times in this paper.

8 Vermurlen, “Reformed Resurgence,” 61.

9 *Ibid.*, 58-60.

10 *Ibid.*, 199.

blogs, Facebook, and contemporary music, among others. This style of communication has a strong appeal for the younger generation.

## CALVINISM IN THE HISTORY OF THE WCBC

Missionaries from the SBC significantly contributed to shaping the doctrinal identity of the WCBC. The majority of Southern Baptists have not been “consistent, five-point Calvinists,”<sup>11</sup> although most of the main leaders of the SBC in their origins held to that position.<sup>12</sup> They have not been consistent Arminians either, but they were at a point in between them. James Leo Garrett uses the term “Calminians” to define the majority position in the SBC,<sup>13</sup> meaning that they hold some ideas of both theological systems. Malcom B. Yarnell III prefers to say that Baptists are neither Calvinists nor Arminians.<sup>14</sup> The same can be said about the WCBC, which has received its doctrinal influence from Southern Baptist American missionaries since its beginning in 1905.

Some contemporary defenders of Calvinism in Cuba have tried to prove that the theology that characterized the WCBC in its origin was completely Calvinist.<sup>15</sup> In his thesis, Pedro Andrés Carrero argues that when the Convention was founded, it had the Philadelphia Confession of Faith as its doctrinal statement. Hence, he assumes that the first pastors who established the Convention, including McCall, were supporters of the

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11 David Dockery, “Southern Baptists and Calvinism: A Historical Look,” in Clendenen and Waggoner, 29; Fisher Humphreys and Paul E. Robertson, *God So Loved the World: Traditional Baptists and Calvinism* (Covington, Louisiana: Insight Press, 2000), 3; David L. Allen and Steve Lemke, eds., *Whosoever Will: A Biblical-Theological Critique of Five-Point Calvinism* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2010), 107; Lemke, “History or Revisionist.”

12 Thomas Ascol and Thomas J. Nettles, “Who is the True Revisionist? A Response to Steve Lemke,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 58, no. 1 (2015); 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, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1986).

13 Allen, and Lemke, *Whosoever Will*, 107.

14 Malcom B. Yarnell III, “Neither Calvinists nor Arminians but Baptists,” *The Center for Theological Research* 36 (2010).

15 Pedro Andrés Carrero Groupierre, “Síntesis Histórica de la Presencia de la Teología Calvinista en Los Bautistas de Cuba Occidental Desde 1882 hasta 1906” [Historical Synthesis of the Presence of Calvinist Theology in the Baptists of Western Cuba from 1882 to 1906] (Thesis, Seminario Teológico Bautista “Dr. Luis Manuel González Peña,” 2019).

“doctrines of grace” (my translation),<sup>16</sup> which is a synonym for five-point Calvinism. Another argument Carrero presents is that many churches in the Convention adopted the New Hampshire Confession (NHC) as their faith statement when they were organized. A significant example is “El Calvario” [Calvary] church in Havana. Carrero asserts that the purpose of the NHC was “to facilitate and provide a simple defense of the Calvinists’ principles” (my translation).<sup>17</sup> He does not take into consideration that with this Confession, “The New Hampshire Convention . . . sought to restate its Calvinism in very moderate tones.”<sup>18</sup> The rise of the Free Will Baptists after 1780 prompted the Calvinistic Baptists in the area of New Hampshire to considerably modify their views.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the NHC represents a moderate Calvinism.<sup>20</sup> This is the consensus of most renowned Baptist historians such as Stanley Grenz, William R. Estep, James Leo Garret, and W. W. Barnes.<sup>21</sup> German Reformed historian and later Presbyterian, Phillip Schaff, concurs.<sup>22</sup> The fact that some Calvinist Baptist scholars strongly rejected this Confession, precisely because it does not express classical Calvinism, is additional evidence for this conclusion.<sup>23</sup>

Leon McBeth asserts that before the Southern Baptist Convention had their Confession of Faith (*The Baptist Faith and Message*) in 1925, Baptist churches in the South adhered either to the Philadelphia Confession or the NHC.<sup>24</sup> Since the organization of the WCBC occurred in 1905, it makes perfect sense that they used the Philadelphia Confession as

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16 Ibid., 81.

17 Ibid., 69.

18 William L. Lumpkin and Bill Leonard, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2011), 377.

19 Ibid., 376; E. Peter Frank Lumpkins, “The New Hampshire Declaration of Faith: Reevaluating Its Impact on Baptism in the South During the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* [JBTM] 15, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 35, 36.

20 Frank Lumpkins, “New Hampshire Declaration of Faith,” 31.

21 Ibid., 36; W. W. Barnes, “The New Hampshire Confession of Faith, Its Origin and Use,” *The Review and Expositor* 39 (1942), 5-6.

22 Lemke, “History or Revisionist,” 252.

23 Ibid., 38.

24 H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1987), 677.

the Convention's faith statement at the same time that churches were organized having that confession or the New Hampshire one. Does that mean that all the leaders and members of the churches were five-point or strict Calvinists? Did they *emphasize* Calvinist soteriology as the identity of the Convention? McBeth asserts that "ample evidence confirms that Baptists regarded it (the Philadelphia Confession) as a general guide in no way approximating, much less displacing, biblical authority."<sup>25</sup> Historical evidence confirms that this was the case in Cuba also.

Another argument that Carrero used was the fact that the textbook for the study of Systematic Theology for many years was the Compendium that J. M. Pendleton authored. Carrero fails to recognize that Pendleton was a four-point Calvinist who was plainly and decisively opposed to limited atonement.<sup>26</sup> Hence, this should be evidence, if one follows the same logic, that Baptists in Western Cuba were not five-point Calvinists.

Even though the Convention adopted the Philadelphia Confession of Faith at its beginning,<sup>27</sup> Calvinist soteriology (five-point Calvinism) has not been consistently *emphasized* in the history of the Convention.<sup>28</sup> A good source of information to verify this statement is the Convention magazine, first called *Sion* and later *La Voz Bautista* [The Baptist Voice]. This magazine was published twice a month and reflected the theological position of the Convention, including its soteriology. These primary sources show that Western Cuba Baptists' understanding of the doctrine of salvation was not strictly Calvinist. Several articles present a different soteriology.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, no articles defend some essential points of

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25 Ibid., 379.

26 J. M. Pendleton, *Christian Doctrines: A Compendium of Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist, c.1906), 241-45.

27 Book of Minutes of the Western Cuba Baptist Convention Annual Meetings, V. I., 12; *Sion*, 25 January 1912, 5.

28 This writer is not implying that there were no pastors who accepted Dortian Calvinism or that there was no Calvinist influence in the Convention. The assertion is that five-point Calvinism has never been *emphasized* in the history of the WCBC.

29 M. N. McCall, "La Caída del Hombre," [The Fall of Man] *Sion*, 10 Mayo 1909, 1; M. N. McCall, "Salvación," [Salvation] *Sion*, 10 de Junio 1909, 1; M. N. McCall, "Salvación Gratuita," [Free Salvation] *Sion*, 10 Marzo 1910; M. N. McCall, "Salvación Preconocida," [Pre-Known Salvation] 10 Junio 1910, 1; M. N. McCall, "Arrepentimiento," [Repentance] *Sion*, 10 Agosto 1911; M. N. McCall, "Expiación," [Atonement] *Sion*, 10 Diciembre 1911; 25 Enero 1912, 1, 6; T.T. Eaton, "¿Qué diremos a

Dortian Calvinism, for example, limited atonement and irresistible grace.

Moses Nathanael McCall was superintendent of the Home Mission Board of the SBC in Cuba since 1905 (the same year the Convention was organized) until his death in 1947. He also founded the Western Cuba Baptist Theological Seminary in 1906. He is unanimously considered the architect of the WCBC doctrinal identity. Carrero implies throughout his thesis that McCall was a consistent Calvinist.<sup>30</sup> Surprisingly, he does so without providing any evidence from McCall's available works.

McCall did not accentuate or promote Dortian Calvinism. His moderate position regarding soteriology is clear in his writings. He did not compose a theology book, but he frequently wrote in the Convention's official magazine after its beginning in 1907. He penned a section called *Doctrinal* (my translation). He followed the spirit of the NHC instead of the Philadelphia Confession to explain different doctrines.<sup>31</sup> In the book *Tened Fe en Dios* [Have Faith in God], which collected verbatim sermons that McCall preached in Calvary Church and on radio broadcasts in 1943, his soteriological thinking is manifest. He believed in an unlimited atonement.<sup>32</sup> He also explained the universal love of God for humanity, the suffering in the world with the work of the devil, and the free will of human beings.<sup>33</sup> McCall is even more explicit when he explains his understanding of God's foreknowledge and predestination in Rom.8:28-30: "The only interpretation we can give to those words of the great apostle is that God in his great mercy and his love, passing by his sight all the children of men, of all the times, and seeing the willingness of repentance and faith, He chose them to occupy a special place with Him. That is the

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Jesús?" [What We Will Say to Jesus?], *Sion*, 10 Mayo 1912, 3; T. H. Sprague, "¿Envía Dios la calamidad?" [Does God Send Calamity?], *Sion*, 10 Junio 1912, 4, 5; Pablo Besson, "La Falsa Esperanza del Universalismo" [The False Hope of Universalism], *Sion*, 25 Junio 1912, 4, 5; "Un Deber Personal" [A Personal Duty], *Sion*, 10 Noviembre 1912, 5, 8; M. N. McCall, "Voluntad Rendida" [Surrendered Will], *Sion*, 10 Febrero 1913, 1.

30 Carrero, "Síntesis Histórica," 81.

31 *Sion*, 25 Marzo 1912, 1; 10 Mayo 1912, 1; 25 Junio 1912, 1; 25 Septiembre 1912, 1; 10 Enero 1913, 1; 10 Marzo 1913, 1; 25 Marzo 1913, 1.

32 Moses N. McCall, *Tened Fe en Dios* [Have Faith in God] (La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Cenit, 1960), 113.

33 *Ibid.*, 123.

only interpretation that we can give” (my translation).<sup>34</sup>

Thomas Ascol and Thomas J. Nettles define a Calvinist based on the person’s interpretation of foreknowledge.<sup>35</sup> They say, “The non-Calvinists do not accept unconditional particular election built upon this understanding of foreknowledge. They interpret foreknowledge as pre-cognition, an eternal awareness of all that will happen, but absent of any determination, or moral right, to employ effectual means to accomplish a desire, univocally defined, for universal salvation.”<sup>36</sup> For Ascol and Nettles, this is the “fundamental difference” between a Calvinist and a non-Calvinist. If that standard is accepted, McCall was not a Calvinist.

Martin Rodríguez Vivanco was secretary of Calvary Church in Havana, which McCall pastored for several years. Vivanco also held other key responsibilities at the Convention. He was always closely related to McCall and was a faithful collaborator with him. He developed some outlines of McCall’s sermons and published them in a book entitled *Corazón Nuevo* [New Heart]. In those sermons, which reflect the thinking of McCall as Vivanco interpreted it, the author holds unlimited atonement,<sup>37</sup> the free determination of people for salvation in the sense that no one will be “taken by force,”<sup>38</sup> and the need to accept God’s invitation to be saved.<sup>39</sup> Vivanco wrote another sermon, using outlines of McCall’s, in which he says referring to God: “If He saves some, without counting their conditions, and saves others arbitrarily, God would be unjust and capricious. We cannot imagine God acting in such an arbitrary way.”<sup>40</sup>

Finally, Domingo Fernández presents additional evidence. He was

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34 Ibid., 140. McCall makes the same position even plainer in his article “Salvación Preconocida” [Pre-known Salvation], *Sion*, 10 Junio 1910, 1.

35 Ascol and Nettles, “True Revisionist?” 89-90.

36 Ibid.

37 M. N. McCall and M. R. Vivanco, *Corazón Nuevo* [New Heart] (La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Cenit, 1961), 48.

38 Ibid., 145.

39 Ibid., 165.

40 M. N. McCall and M. R. Vivanco, “Los Dos Fundamentos” [The Two Foundations], *La Vida Fructífera* [The Fruitful Life], 20.

McCall's successor as the preacher of a popular radio program broadcast every week. He also substituted for McCall in his Systematic Theology class at the Seminary. Fernandez was more precise and more explicit in his criticism of the classic Calvinist doctrine.<sup>41</sup> In a radio lecture that he published as a pamphlet, entitled "La Predestinación" [Predestination], he offers an interpretation of Romans 8:28-29 that is remarkably similar to the one that McCall held.<sup>42</sup> He expressed his understanding of soteriology in his commentary on Romans.<sup>43</sup>

Another example of Dortian Calvinism's foreignness to the WCBC doctrinal identity occurred in the Havana Baptist Theological Seminary in 1997. At that time, there were around fifty students in the Seminary. The faculty had to dismiss ten of them because of their disruptive attitude trying to enforce their strong Calvinistic views on the rest of the seminarians. They openly despised students (and even professors) who did not embrace their soteriological perspective.<sup>44</sup> The Havana Seminary is the Convention's seminary and responds to its Directive Board. It is significant that no one at the Convention questioned, at least publicly, that decision, because there was no doubt regarding the doctrinal position that the Convention held.

In the history of the Convention, there have been confessing five-point Calvinists. They have been rather exceptional cases, but they have been accepted and even occupied leadership positions at the Convention.<sup>45</sup> The difference between those pastors and the New Calvinists is that they never attempted to Calvinize the Convention, nor were they aggressive in their effort to gain adepts to their theological position. Two of the most well-known pastors who held this position were Israel Cordovés and Humberto

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41 He also rejected Arminianism as a whole system and strongly advocated the assurance of salvation. In the class material he used to teach Systematic Theology, he censures both systems (Calvinism and Arminianism).

42 Domingo Fernández, "La Predestinación" [Predestination] (Habana: Junta de Publicaciones de la Convención Bautista de Cuba Occidental, 1951).

43 Domingo Fernández, *Una Interpretación de Romanos: El Evangelio del Apóstol Pablo* [An Interpretation of Romans: The Gospel According to Paul] (Miami: Unilit, 1997).

44 Alejandro Navarro, "Más de 100 Años Capacitando a los Siervos de Jesucristo: La Historia del Seminario Teológico Bautista de la Habana" [More than 100 Years Capacitating Servants of Jesus Christ: The History of the Havana Baptist Theological Seminary] (Thesis, Seminario Teológico Bautista de la Habana, 2017), 64-5.

45 One of them, Israel Cordovés, was vice-president of the WCBC.

Pérez in the 1980s. They did not promote this particular doctrinal emphasis even in their congregations. The churches they pastored never identified themselves as reformed or Calvinist. They did not attract members from other Baptist churches due to this kind of teaching. When these pastors left, their churches did not look specifically for a Calvinist pastor, but merely a pastor from the Convention. The current president of the WCBC, Dariel Llanes, met the Lord in a church where Cordovés was a pastor. Llanes has often given testimony that in discipleship classes, Cordovés never taught him this doctrine. Cordovés and Pérez were respectful of the doctrinal identity of the Convention, and they never were instigators of divisions for this reason. Sadly, many of the New Calvinists in Western Cuba do not reflect the same attitude.

## THE CURRENT UPSURGE OF CALVINISM IN THE WCBC

In the early 2010s, the Calvinism debate surfaced again in the WCBC among some young pastors and mainly young members of different churches. In 2013, the general assembly of the Convention voted on a revision of its faith statement as part of a strategic planning process that was taking place for the Convention.<sup>46</sup> That was an opportunity to address the disputed topics. The historical position of the Convention was confirmed and clarified in the document, which received unanimous approval from the general assembly in 2014.<sup>47</sup>

Nonetheless, a few pastors of the Convention continued promoting Calvinism. Some did it subtly, and others openly. The pastors of one church of the Convention have a ministry to send Calvinist literature to members of churches of the Convention, even to some who did not ask for those books, pamphlets, and CD videos. They send literature by John Owen (his book defending limited atonement), John Piper, and Paul Washer. They also had a “Bible” course in which the first study is of the Second Baptist London Confession, 1689. Another pastor has sponsored conferences inviting prominent Calvinists as speakers. The most worrisome aspect is

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46 The WCBC approved its autochthonous faith statement in 1978. Bárbaro Abel Marrero Castellanos et al., *Los Principios Bautistas y Nuestra Declaración de Fe* (Habana: Editorial Bautista, 2014), 25.

47 Ibid., 26.

that several churches have experienced bitter divisions for this cause.

Because of situations like these, at the 2018 Annual Convention Meeting of the WCBC, Pastor Joel Díaz, from the First Baptist Church, Varadero, presented a motion to the assembly in which he asked for the next Annual Convention Meeting to analyze and define a procedure to be used with the pastors who have embraced the five-point Calvinist doctrine.<sup>48</sup> Díaz explained his concern regarding how the doctrines of limited atonement and unconditional election affect the Great Commission. After hearing words for and against the motion, the next day, the former President of the Convention and retired pastor, Alberto Gonzalez, presented a substitute motion that was finally approved. The agreement prompted the Directive Board of the Convention, with the advice of the Presidential Commission of the Havana Baptist Theological Seminary, to study, elaborate, and bring to the next Annual Convention Meeting a conciliatory procedure to solve the problematic situations that the WCBC was facing.<sup>49</sup>

The next year (2019), at the Annual Convention Meeting, the Secretary-General presented to the assembly a report about the work that the Directive Board of the Convention and the Havana Baptist Theological Seminary performed.<sup>50</sup> The report included some suggestions to cope with the reality in which the Convention is living. In the study, the committee concluded that (New) Calvinism had become a problem in the Convention. As evidence, the committee took into consideration the churches that experienced division because of the introduction of this doctrine. Second, the tensions created between churches and their pastors reached the point that several churches had to fire their pastors when the situation became unbearable. Third, the pastoral committee had to mediate in several churches that struggled over these issues.<sup>51</sup> Fourth, there were pastors attracting members (especially young people) from other churches of the Convention to their congregations due to the promotion of this doctrine. Understandably, the leaders and members of the churches losing

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48 Minutes of the Western Cuba Baptist Convention Annual Meeting, 2018.

49 Ibid.

50 The author takes all the information on this paragraph from the report.

51 The “pastoral committee” is a permanent committee of the Convention whose function is to mediate in conflicts between churches and pastors.

members were uncomfortable. The Directive Board also lamented that pastors of this persuasion were using social media to attack the Convention, putting in doubt the historical prestige of the Convention. Some of the information they made public was exaggerated or completely inaccurate data.

Supporters from outside Cuba of the New Calvinists in the WCBC have reproduced those inaccuracies in the media. An article appeared on the Founders Ministries website, entitled “What is going on in the Western Baptist Convention of Cuba?” The author, Tom Ascol, rightly states that his “understanding of Baptist work in Cuba is admittedly limited.” However, even with this limited understanding, he published and made public his judgment about the internal situation of the WCBC. He concluded that the motion (presented by Joel Díaz) “expresses a course of action to withdraw fellowship from pastors and churches who believe and preach these [Calvinist] doctrines.” That conclusion is inaccurate. In the first place, Díaz’s motion did not express any course of action, and secondly, the motion did not suggest any action be taken at all with the churches. However, that message was the inaccurate news that several brothers and sisters heard in the US. At the end of his article, there is a subtle threat to break relationships with the Convention if the general assembly decided against his Calvinist friends.<sup>52</sup>

## **OBEDIENCE TO THE GREAT COMMISSION IN THE CURRENT SITUATION**

Baptists in Western Cuba have always been committed evangelists,<sup>53</sup> even during the difficult years of hostility from the government toward the church in Cuba.<sup>54</sup> Without hesitation, they have proclaimed God’s

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52 Tom Ascol, “What is going on in the Western Baptist Convention of Cuba?” accessed October 8, 2019, <https://founders.org/2018/03/08/what-is-going-on-in-the-western-baptist-convention-of-cuba/>.

53 Among the topics presented in the Convention annual meetings, the evangelistic work is recurrent. Minutes of the Western Cuba Baptist Convention.

54 Holding evangelistic crusades several times a year was a common practice in most of the churches of the Convention. They had to do it inside the church building since public services were not allowed. Members invited their relatives and friends, and a pastor from a different church preached the

love for every human being and His consequent sincere desire for the salvation of every person in this world.<sup>55</sup> Unlimited atonement has been an undisputable presupposition. The Baptists have also affirmed that human beings have free will and that the only thing that prevents their salvation is their voluntary rejection of Jesus Christ. Sinners must repent and believe as a free response to God's grace.

Some Christians consider Calvinism to be anti-missionary.<sup>56</sup> The first significant experience with a divisive internal doctrinal controversy among Baptists in America was related to Calvinism (among other factors) and missions.<sup>57</sup> The adherents of the anti-mission movement of the 1820s believed that "conversion was God's task alone"<sup>58</sup> and "totally rejected all human instrumentality in the work of evangelism."<sup>59</sup> McBeth affirms that they "held to such strict predestination that mission societies and all other 'human effort' agencies seemed improper. If human destiny is already determined, then missionary effort loses its theological base."<sup>60</sup> In the same fashion, Yarnell asserts, "We are not Calvinists because we are genuinely concerned about the impact of Dortian Calvinism upon evangelism."<sup>61</sup> Even a consistent Calvinist like Iain Murray "warns that when Calvinism ceases to be evangelistic, when it becomes more concerned with theory than with the salvation of men and women, when acceptance of doctrines seems to become more important than acceptance of Christ, then it is a system going to seed and will invariably lose its attractive power."<sup>62</sup>

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gospel and made a public invitation to accept Christ.

55 Some of the New Calvinists promoting their position in the Convention deny that God loves sinners or wants every person's salvation. Many of them are devoted followers of Paul Washer, who affirms in some of his famous videos that the evangelical slogan, "God hates the sin, but loves the sinner," is a heresy.

56 Michael Horton, *For Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2011), 151; Jeremy S. Darden, "An Evaluation of Calvinism's Effect on Southern Baptist Missions and Evangelism" (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 5.

57 McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, 377.

58 *Ibid.*, 371.

59 William H. Brackney, ed., *Baptist Life and Thought: A Source Book* (Valley Forge, PA: Jedson Press, 1998), 208.

60 McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, 375.

61 Yarnell, "Neither Calvinists nor Arminian," 3.

62 Dockery, in Clendenen and Waggoner, 41.

One of the main reasons that prompted Joel Díaz to present his motion in the 2018 General Meeting of the WCBC was that Calvinist doctrine “affects the fulfillment of the Great Commission” (my translation).<sup>63</sup> Indeed, there are reasons for concern. The number of baptisms in the Convention in 2017 was the lowest in 25 years. In 2018, although the number of baptisms slightly increased, it still was the lowest in the eight previous years (except for 2017).<sup>64</sup> According to Ed Stetzer, surveys in the SBC indicate that “congregations led by Calvinists tend to show smaller attendance and typically baptize fewer people each year.”<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand, several authors claim that Calvinism is not per se a hindrance to missionary work. As Michael Horton has aptly displayed, the contribution that several Calvinists have made to missions and evangelism is indisputable.<sup>66</sup> However, many of the most influential missionaries confronted the strict Calvinism of their time and moderated some classical Calvinist positions. Three examples are Andrew Fuller, William Carey, and Hudson Taylor. Fuller and Carey were Baptists who played a pivotal role in the modern missionary movement. They had to oppose the strict Calvinism of their days and promote an evangelical version.<sup>67</sup>

Fuller’s work, *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* “turned Particular Baptists around, brought a new style of preaching, helped stave off the paralysis of hyper-Calvinism, developed a theology of moderate conservatism that made possible the missionary movement embodied in William Carey, and laid the groundwork for Baptist advance in the nineteenth century.”<sup>68</sup> Fuller embraced a modified Calvinism.<sup>69</sup>

William Carey had to challenge the rigid Calvinism of his time when he felt the need to take the gospel to the ends of the world. The answer

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63 Motion presented by Joel Díaz to the 2018 General Assembly of the WCBC.

64 Statistics were provided by Dr. Kurt Urbanek, IMB missionary in Cuba. Paradoxically, this decrease is occurring in a time when many churches are considerably reducing their traditionally high standards required to baptize a new believer.

65 Ed Stetzer, “Calvinism, Evangelism, and SBC Leadership,” in Clendenen and Waggoner, 13; see also Darden, “Evaluation of Calvinism’s Effect,” 152.

66 Horton, *For Calvinism*, 152-63.

67 Brackney, *Baptist Life and Thought*, 86.

68 McBeth, *Baptist Heritage*, 182.

69 *Ibid.*, 183.

that Ryland gave to him has become famous: “Sit down, young man. You are an enthusiast! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without consulting you or me.”<sup>70</sup> That prompted Carey to write one of the most significant works on missions ever produced, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*.

The same progression affected the Baptists in Colonial America. Their evangelistic and missionary passion contributed to their adoption of a balanced position. McBeth asserts, “The tendency of Baptists in Colonial America was to moderate their Calvinism to allow some degree of human responsibility and response and to encourage human ‘effort,’ such as preaching, missions, and evangelism.”<sup>71</sup> The SBC likewise experienced a tendency to moderation: “Southern Baptists have retained some Calvinism, but their doctrinal inheritance from General Baptists of England and Separate Baptists of the South, plus their commitment to evangelism and missions, have muted the Calvinistic part of their background.”<sup>72</sup>

Undoubtedly, missionaries’ theological positions will determine their attitudes in many ways. Hudson Taylor is one of the most famous missionaries. His work in China was remarkable, not only for what he did personally but also for the impact of the organization he founded, China Inland Mission, which is immeasurable. In Taylor’s autobiography, he reveals how the unlimited atonement of Christ inspired his missionary work. When he reached Ningpo in 1856, one of the most ancient and influential cities on the coast of China, he wrote, “Four hundred thousand human beings dwell within or around the five miles circuit of its ancient wall, every one a soul that Jesus loves, for whom he died.”<sup>73</sup> These two realities, Jesus’ universal love and His unlimited atonement, fueled Taylor’s missionary passion.

A contemporary example of a five-point Calvinist and promoter of missions is John Piper. His book *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of*

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70 Ibid., 185.

71 Ibid., 149.

72 Ibid., 774.

73 J. Hudson Taylor, *J. Hudson Taylor: An Autobiography* (Lexington, KY: ReadaClassic.com, 2014), 79.

*God in Missions* is widely used to teach missions in seminaries.<sup>74</sup> Piper is a consistent Calvinist, but at the same time, he affirms the universal love of God for humanity and God's universal desire for humanity's salvation. His theory of two wills in God (secret and revealed) prompts him to emphasize missions while he actively sustains a reformed theology.<sup>75</sup> According to Piper, in His revealed will God loves and desires the salvation of every person in this world, but in His secret will He decrees to provide salvation only for the elect. Hence, God has a universal love (in His revealed will), and at the same time, He has an electing love (in His secret will).<sup>76</sup> This theory appears to imply a contradiction, besides the crucial questions that arise for proper theology and the doctrine of revelation. Nevertheless, at least the revealed will could encourage the followers of this model to be more involved in missions.

New Calvinists in the WCBC highly respect Piper, but most of them do not seem to follow Piper's understanding of the two wills. They maintain that God does not have salvific love for every person and try to prove that John 3:16 means that God loves only the world of the elect. Similarly, they teach that in 1 Timothy 2:4, Paul does not say that God wants the salvation of every person, but the salvation of all kinds of persons. As a consequence, this understanding could lead to the logical conclusion that if God does not want the salvation of every person, why should a Christian want it?

Whatever the influence the Calvinist doctrine may have for or against missions, the reality is that a divided church cannot accomplish her mission consistently. In his John 17 priestly prayer, Jesus highlights the connection between unity in the church and the Great Commission (vv. 21, 23). The conclusion of the sociologist Vermurlen in his well-documented Ph.D. research is eye-opening: "American Evangelicalism is not a unified movement but instead a heterogeneous arena of conflict and contestation."<sup>77</sup> Unfortunately, several churches have split and suffered

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74 Philip O. Hopkins, "Missions for the Glory of God: An Analysis of the Missionary Theology of John Piper" (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 1.

75 Ibid., 146-49.

76 Ibid., 156.

77 Vermurlen, "Reformed Resurgence," 284.

times of distress over Calvinism in the WCBC.<sup>78</sup> Those divisions have been a terrible testimony for a watching world and a paralyzing distraction for a traditionally evangelistic Convention.

Calvinism usually creates divisions when people attempt to introduce it in churches that historically have not held that doctrine. Daniel L. Akin, referring to the reality in the SBC, affirms, “Hidden agendas have divided churches and fractured fellowships.”<sup>79</sup> Church divisions over Calvinism seem to be a critical phenomenon in the SBC.<sup>80</sup> Typically, when a new pastor comes to a church and tries to impose a Calvinist doctrine, the church suffers. This situation is more painful when the pastor had not declared his theological position and his agenda for the church before coming to it. Sometimes, members have to leave with sorrow the church in which they were faithful members for many years.<sup>81</sup> In other cases, the church has to experience a period of high tension or complete separation. Unbelievably, some Calvinist leaders consider it to be commendable when a church splits due to a pastor who starts teaching Calvinism in a congregation that has a different doctrinal identity. Pastor Jeff Noblit affirms, “From my experience, the rise in Calvinism will produce better church splits. And by that I mean that it’s healthy for humble, compassionate men to stand on truth even if it divides a congregation.”<sup>82</sup> Writing on the teaching of Calvinism in a non-Calvinistic church, he declares:

Nevertheless, many of our professing churches are so doctrinally deficient and spiritually dark that they cannot stand the light of truth. The result of the collision of a Bible-preaching pastor and

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78 Report on the Work Made by the Directive Board and the Presidential Committee of the Havana Baptist Theological Seminary in Fulfilment of the Agreement of the General Assembly of the Western Cuba Baptist Convention Related to the Elaboration of a Conciliatory Procedure that Helps the Convention to Solve Some of her More Pressing Problems.

79 Daniel Akin, “Answering the Call to a Great Commission Resurgence,” in Clendenen and Waggoner, 258.

80 Bob Allen, “SBC Leader Says Calvinism Steadily Dividing Church,” *Christian Century* (November 15, 2011), 19.

81 Humphreys and Robertson, *God So Loved*, 1-2.

82 Jeff Noblit, “The Rise of Calvinism in the Southern Baptist Convention: Reason for Rejoicing,” in Clendenen and Waggoner, *Calvinism*, 101.

a spiritually and doctrinally weak church will be either God-sent revival and unity or God-sent division, which may also lead to revival. Splitting over essential doctrine is not only inevitable; it's commanded, and it's commendable.<sup>83</sup>

Ed Young Jr. raises another concern. He laments that Calvinists, instead of reaching out to non-Christians, “prey on’ and draw in young impressionable people who are already Christians.”<sup>84</sup> Sadly, that is an accurate description of the current reality in some churches of the WCBC. As a reaction, pastors caring for their churches’ young people have to teach about this doctrine and unwillingly introduce them to this debate. That emphasis may result in churches focusing on a doctrinal controversy instead of fulfilling the Great Commission. The militant attitude of some New Calvinists trying to convert evangelical Christians instead of reaching out to the lost, is not advancing the Great Commission. It is damaging the church. Unity is essential, but the only way to be genuinely united is if Calvinists and non-Calvinists consider each other as brothers and sisters, respect their theological differences, and do not attempt to impose their position on the other. They must work together, sharing the gospel with the lost world.

The debate over Calvinism could paralyze the church when one group in the congregation attempts to “convert” the other group, which likewise struggles to stay firm in its convictions. Congregations living in this kind of agony urgently need to take steps toward change. As the SBC committee of Calvinist and non-Calvinist leaders concluded, churches must decide if they want to be “churches on mission or merely a debating society.”<sup>85</sup> That applies to the WCBC. The first option will advance the Great Commission; the second will not.

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83 Ibid., 100.

84 Vermurlen, “Reformed Resurgence,” 272-73.

85 “Truth, Trust, and Testimony in a Time of Tension: A Statement from the Calvinism Advisory Committee,” *Baptist Press* (May 31, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

In this article, the author has asserted that the resurgence of Calvinism is negatively affecting the fulfillment of the Great Commission in the WCBC. The resurgence is a global trend that is impacting the WCBC. The doctrines that the New Calvinists sustain have never been emphasized among the Baptists in Western Cuba, and Calvinism is not their doctrinal identity. The fact that some leaders have tried to impose this teaching has created profound distress in several of the Convention churches. While there are different opinions on whether Calvinism promotes or hinders missions, the tensions and divisions that several churches of the Convention have experienced in the last few years are damaging their healthy development and outreach. The decrease of baptisms in the Convention in the last few years may be a consequence of this situation. A more exhaustive quantitative study of this situation in the WCBC will provide further elements for a better understanding.

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