

The following is an attempt to answer the most frequently asked questions I've received regarding various theological tensions among Primitive Baptists during the past eight years (written in 2008.)

### **Q: How did you get involved in the present crisis?**

MG: I pastor a church that was sadly disturbed in the early 1990's over these very issues. The previous pastor (who has since left the PB's and joined the Southern Baptists) became disenchanted with the "exclusivity" of PB's and wanted to give the church here a more positive image in the community. This ecumenical objective translated, first, into some changes in church practice, like having children's church, women's groups, etc. Though some in the church "raised an eyebrow" to these changes, they didn't say much about them. Soon, however, he began to preach "bullet-in-the-hole" Calvinism – the idea that an evangelical belief in the Lord Jesus Christ and eternal life are inseparably connected, just like a bullet and the hole that it makes are inseparably connected. A few in the church actually agreed with his new emphasis, and some recognized it at once as a departure from the truth concerning the purpose of the gospel and the hallmark PB distinction between regeneration and conversion. Most were simply confused and disillusioned by the controversy.

In the end, those with a personal commitment to the man and those who really believed like he did left the church, and several who had become disillusioned by the confusion just quit attending. The church was without a pastor for almost three years. Those who had assumed leadership in the interim were trying to maintain a moderate, or neutral, position, but the confusion within the flock persisted.

When I came here, only a handful of people were attending public worship, and they were so shell-shocked by the controversy that they hesitated to affirm even basic doctrinal sermons on salvation by grace alone. It took quite awhile to reestablish the church in the fundamentals of

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the faith. Consequently, when a young minister outside of our church began to try to proselyte some of our church members to these views again in the fall of 2000, and one particular young man in our church began to push these same subversive doctrines behind the scenes, I felt it to be my responsibility as the shepherd of this flock to try to protect and defend it against a repetition of the kind of trouble experienced just a decade previous.

That pastoral responsibility necessarily involved me in an effort to challenge the man from outside and the young man within our local church who were sowing seeds of discord within our congregation. These men were ridiculing the practice of distinguishing between eternal salvation and temporal or gospel salvation. They mocked the ignorance of Primitive Baptists who believed this way and expressed how embarrassing it was that we were so different in this regard to other Christians. I saw their desire to remove this classic PB distinction and to push the idea that the present life has eternal significance – that is, to teach only “one” salvation – as the kind of classic reformed theology popularized by MacArthur, Piper, Sproul, Mohler, and Nettles in our day. It soon became evident that an effort to modify PB doctrine, particularly in regard to this distinction between unconditional eternal salvation and conditional temporal salvation, was gaining momentum in a few PB circles and the church that I pastor was under particular attack. That’s how I got involved.

### **Q: What is the primary issue in dispute?**

MG: Well, most people who have followed this debate understand that there is disagreement over the subjects of Perseverance and the Absolute Predestination of all things. What they may not realize is that the root of the controversy is really a debate between what has been termed “Temporal Salvation” and “Lordship Salvation”. Let me explain.

In the mid-1980’s, John MacArthur published a book entitled *The Gospel According to Jesus* in which he argued for a position known as “Lordship Salvation”. That book created a firestorm of controversy within evangelicalism, eliciting rebuttals from Zane Hodges, Charles Ryrie, and others, and garnering support from others like Michael Horton, R. C. Sproul, and more. MacArthur’s argument was simply that a person may not have Christ as Savior without also acknowledging Him as Lord. In other words, he objected to what other, lesser-known writers had called “the Carnal Christian heresy”. He claimed that a person who is truly saved will manifest that salvation by believing the gospel and living an obedient and faithful Christian

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life—that there is no such thing, ultimately, as a disobedient child of God—that the individual who fails to live in submission to the Lordship of Christ demonstrates that he was never truly born again—that only those who embrace Christianity are truly saved. MacArthur argued, in other words, for the old Puritan idea that everyone who is truly saved will persevere in faith and holiness.

Now, PB's have characteristically held, not to "Lordship Salvation" but, to "Temporal Salvation". That is to say, our position has been that there is a distinction to be made between Sonship and Discipleship—between being a child of God and being a follower of Jesus Christ. In the Lordship Salvation paradigm, regeneration and discipleship are so intertwined that one does not exist without the other. In 2002, a PB preacher in Virginia preached a sermon in which he labored to prove that "belief in Jesus Christ and eternal life are married—you cannot put asunder what God has joined together." That's the "Lordship Salvation" position. But Primitive Baptists do not believe that regeneration automatically produces discipleship. We believe that though the Lord has a big family, a people "out of every nation, kindred, tongue, and people", yet only "few" are walking the narrow way of discipleship. This practice of distinguishing between eternal salvation and time salvation, between union with Christ and communion with Him, between regeneration and gospel conversion, between preservation and perseverance, between predestination and providence, etc. is crucial to the correct interpretation of God's word. God's child may in fact live in disobedience to God's revealed will for his life, and fail to glorify the Lord who redeemed him in this world, as the tragic cases of Lot, King Saul, Solomon, Samson, the Rich Young Ruler and others demonstrate. He may be deceived in his mind by false religion. Christians may in fact be carnal, allowing the old nature to dominate, as the Corinthian Church reveals (1 Cor. 3:1-4). But there are blessings to be had in obedience—that is, there is a salvation in the gospel from this present evil world that the prodigal child misses in this world.

Well, to make a long story short, a few of our preachers became enamored with (or you might even say "star-struck by" MacArthur and Sproul and Jay Adams and other popular figures in the "reformed" evangelical community, and they began to subscribe to his views on "perseverance" or "Lordship Salvation". When these ministers began to circulate these views among the Old Baptists and sought to implement a new paradigm of Biblical interpretation that blurred the classic distinctions between sonship and discipleship—that is, when they married both concepts and taught that regeneration inevitably leads to gospel repentance, faith, and obedience—they stirred confusion among the PB's. They began to apply passages that Old Baptists had characteristically interpreted in the context of Christian discipleship and the "salvation" that is to be found in obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ in terms of eternal salvation, just like MacArthur and other popular, "reformed" figures were teaching. Passages such as Mt. 7:13-14 (i.e. the narrow way vs the broad way), Romans 10:1, Mr. 16:16, Acts 16:31 and others that had almost without exception been viewed in terms of discipleship among mainstream PB's were now reinterpreted by these men in terms of eternal salvation. This blurring of distinctions that PB's have deemed crucial to hermeneutical integrity posed a threat to the very heart and soul of

the gospel of grace, as we believe it.

Of course, neither the “Lordship Salvation” nor the “Absoluter” crowd believe in distinguishing between unconditional eternal salvation and conditional time salvation – both decry the practice of interpreting Scripture in that way. Hence, in effect, this current controversy is very similar to the division over Absolutism among the PB’s in the early 1900’s. The eastern seaboard of the United States is littered with churches that were once thriving and strong but are now virtually extinct because of the influence of absolutism. Who would have thought that just a century later, we would be engaged in the very same confusion again?

**Q: So, they are applying Scriptures that have to do with “time salvation” to eternal salvation?**

MG: Yes, they’re applying “timely” verses to eternal salvation, and, strangely, they’re also interpreting verses that our people have characteristically used to teach “eternal salvation”, like Romans 8:28, to “time”. If it were not so tragic, it would almost be comical.

**Q: But aren’t the differences minor and inconsequential? Isn’t this really just a controversy over words—a disagreement over semantics?**

MG: Well, that is the argument these men have made, but it is a subterfuge. These doctrinal changes are not peripheral and superficial; rather, they strike right at the very heart of the integrity of the gospel message as Primitive Baptists believe it.

I admit that the arguments are “subtle”, or more accurately, “technical”—that is, they deal with some very fine and precise theological points and for that reason some people assume that the

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issues are unimportant. But just because an issue is complex does not mean that it is petty or insignificant.

Let me illustrate what I mean. In the early fourth century, the Council of Nicaea met to clarify Christian doctrine concerning the Person of Christ in the face of the Arian challenge. The entire debate focused on a single letter in the Greek text—a single letter. In fact, historians are fond of saying that the Council of Nicaea split over one “iota”. Arius maintained that the nature of Christ was similar to that of the Father, but Athanasius insisted that Christ’s nature was the same as that of the Father. The difference between the Greek words for similar and same is one letter of the alphabet: the letter i. Some would argue that such hair-splitting is irrelevant, but the issue at stake was nothing less than the doctrine of Christ’s divinity. Had Arius and his followers carried the day in favor of the word similar, the entire landscape of Christian history might have been significantly altered.

I read a story that illustrates how a small mark of punctuation can change the meaning of an entire message. Back in the days of the telegraph, a woman sent a message to her husband at home requesting permission to purchase an expensive bracelet. She quoted the price at \$75,000. Her husband replied “No, price too high”, but the cable operator failed to include the comma. The woman received the message, “No price too high”, and bought the bracelet. The husband, in turn, sued the telegraph company and won. After that episode, everyone spelled out punctuation marks when using Morse code.

These stories illustrate the principle that precision and accuracy matter when an issue is as important as the Deity of Christ or the purchase of an expensive piece of jewelry. And this current controversy deals with an issue of equal importance. In fact, it deals with the very heart and soul of who we are as Primitive Baptists. It is the practice of distinguishing between Unconditional Eternal Salvation and Conditional Gospel Salvation that separates PB’s from virtually every other group, even those that profess to believe in the Doctrines of Grace. The attempt to blur that distinction, therefore, and to discredit the legitimacy of “rightly dividing the word of truth” (for instance, PB’s have classically distinguished between justification by grace, by faith, and by works, but those who subscribe to “reformed theology” insist on only one category—justification by faith alone) strikes right at the heart of that which makes Primitive Baptists different from Sovereign Grace Baptists, Landmarkers, Independent Missionary Baptists, Reformed Baptists, Presbyterians, the Founder’s Movement, and many others. Of course, this is the very point. These men among us want fellowship with those groups. In my opinion, they are motivated by a desire for ecumenical unity with these denominations. They don’t believe that the Primitive Baptists possess the identity of the New Testament Church. Their view of the “church” is more vague and nebulous than our people have historically maintained.

I know of no other group whose message is as consistent as the Old Baptist message. I heartily believe that it is the truth. To understand that certain passages refer to eternal salvation and that others have to do with how the child of God is supposed to walk and serve God in this life as a grateful response to His amazing grace—to understand that God’s gift of salvation is wholly unconditional on man’s part but that glorifying Him by a life of faith and obedience involves man’s will and deliberate effort—is to make sense of the Bible in a way that no other group besides Primitive Baptists can do. I don’t think that is a matter of trivial or minor importance at all.

**Q: Since the issues are so subtle and technical, it has been difficult for the “rank and file” believer to wrap his arms around the debate. In a nutshell, what are the primary emphases that are causing such unrest among the PB’s?**

MG: One reason it has been difficult for the ordinary church member to recognize the deviations in doctrine is because this new emphasis has been a position “in flux” – an amorphous position—a moving target, if you please. At first, it was very easy to recognize the challenge to orthodoxy because the statements were so blatant. Notice the “uncertain sound” of gospel means in these actual, verbatim quotes from either ordained elders or young men who were exercising for the PB ministry. Again, these are actual, verbatim, unedited quotations from several of our own ministers and “exercising” brethren. Most of these quotations originate from articles written and sermons preached in the early days of this crisis—in 2000 and 2001—and I could supply names and documentation if compelled:

- “God uses the gospel minister as His instrument in the eternal salvation of the elect.”
- “A certain amount of Christian orthodoxy is necessary to final salvation.”
- “Salvation is daily therapy...there are ‘means of grace’ which must be employed.”
- “The Bible is relentless in holding forth both God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility in relation to salvation.”
  - “Preaching as a ‘means of grace’ to assist the saints to persevere, and perseverance as necessary for final salvation. Therefore every sermon is a “salvation sermon”- not just because of its aim to convert sinners, but also in its aim to preserve the holy affections of the saints and so enable them to confirm their calling and election, and be saved.”
  - “If you don’t believe that your ministry has any eternal consequence, then I seriously doubt that you will have the courage or strength necessary to persevere in the face of opposition and discouragement.”

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- “All those who were predestinated unto salvation, Jesus Christ came and died for them, therefore the Holy Spirit will quicken each one of them and they SHALL hear with an effectual ear the gospel and rejoice in Christ as their Savior and be converted.” [emphasis original]
- “[Preachers], although worthy of no glory or praise, are [an] inherent part of God’s work in the salvation of His elect and will be until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.”
- “[In the NT], we find that God has made [men] essential elements of his plan. This is especially true when we consider justification...What we learn is that justification comes by faith (Gal. 2:16) and faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17). God connects us to His righteousness by faith in Christ, thereby imparting His saving benefits to us. It is faith in Christ that God has ordained to unite us with His Son.”
- “Believing in Christ and eternal life are married and what God has joined together, let not man put asunder.”
- “If belief is a condition to salvation, then where does this belief come from? From the God who elected you to salvation. It’s all part of the plan. I submit that is the historic and Biblical position that has been held by Primitive Baptists in ages past.”
- “Many PB churches today are eliminating the word ‘perseverance’ from their articles of faith and it absolutely blows my mind. Now, the word means that the child of grace will ‘hang in there’ in a state of grace until death. He will continue, at least to some degree, in the way of righteousness. If he sins, he repents—‘The just man falleth down seven times and rises again’ (Pro. 24:16). That’s the doctrine of perseverance.”
- “Jesus prayed that every one of His children would be sanctified by the word and did Jesus’ prayers always get answered? Amen! Sanctification is a guaranteed part of the salvation package.”
- “Conditional time salvation eliminates the Biblical notion that sanctification—daily growth in grace—is a definite and guaranteed part of the salvation package.”
- “Now I would not suggest that it’s impossible that an individual in a foreign land without the benefit and aid of the gospel, the Bible, or the church, could be called by God, because we believe in a sovereign Holy Spirit. But the question is, ‘Does a person who has been reached by the Holy Spirit then stay in this element of ignorance and darkness, or is he drawn to Christ?’.”

These are the actual statements from various PB ministers that started this great crisis. But as some of our ministers recognized these statements as a hybrid form of “bullet-in-the-hole Calvinism” and these brethren were challenged on the claim that the gospel is instrumental to eternal salvation, they retreated to other ground. They then began to espouse that “everything happens in the new birth”, that is, when a person is born again, he automatically believes in Christ, repents of his sins, grows in grace, and perseveres in holiness. Those who initially said that the terminology of “time salvation” was repugnant to them, now said, “I believe in time salvation; I just don’t think that it is optional.” (another direct quote). A number of our brethren quickly recognized this position as a form of “absolutism”—that is, the idea that God sovereignly decrees events. If repentance, believing in Christ, and personal obedience are not “optional”, then obviously, they are “guaranteed” and “certain”. And clearly, that is the argument they were making. They were saying that if a person has truly been born again, he will repent, he will believe, he will persevere; those who do not give evidence by their disobedience that they have

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never truly been born again.

To say, “Yes, I believe in time salvation, but I just don’t believe it is optional” is to pinpoint the very root of the conflict. It is that idea – namely, that discipleship is certain for everyone who is truly saved, that every son will be a disciple, that repentance, faith, obedience, and daily growth in grace is a “guaranteed part of the salvation package” – that we object to. It all stems from an effort to dismiss the practice of distinguishing between eternal and temporal salvation, the one feature in Biblical interpretation that makes PB theology more consistent than any other theological grid.

But now it seems that this evolving view is returning full circle to where it began. One of these men recently said regarding his labors in a foreign country, “We held up Christ to them in the gospel; they turned to Him and He saved them.” (again, a direct quote). In all candor, that sounds more like Missionary Baptist doctrine to me than Primitive Baptist doctrine. So, to make a long story short, it appears that their position is again morphing back into its original form.

**Q: The criticism has been made that such quotes are taken out of context – that if they were placed in the fuller context, people would not be alarmed.**

MG: That’s just a subterfuge. Ask yourself “Is there any context in which a real, died-in-the-wool Primitive Baptist would accept the statement ‘The gospel minister is God’s instrument in the eternal salvation of the elect’?” Is there any context in which a PB could endorse that quote? How about, ‘A certain amount of Christian orthodoxy is necessary to final salvation’? Is that what Primitive Baptists believe? No. That’s what Calvinism asserts. Such a claim is a smokescreen – a rhetorical trick – designed to distract people from what was actually said.

**Q: It has been said that these men have been “misunderstood” and suggested that PB ministers have been duped into believing a lie about their brethren? Is that a possibility?**

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MG: Well, if words have any meaning, how could you “misunderstand” the quotes I just cited above? Let me ask you a question: Is it really plausible to think that the brightest and best of Primitive Baptist preachers are not smart enough to understand what a few of their brethren are preaching? We’re not talking about novices here; we’re not talking about immature, impressionable beginners in the faith, but about some of the most respected and trusted ministers among the PB’s. If this was a personal vendetta or simply a political power play, do you really think it would be possible that all of these stable and mature brethren could be swept away en masse and deluded to believe a lie? One or two of them maybe, but all of them? Surely our seasoned brethren would have seen thru the façade a long time ago. It is really insulting to the intelligence of our ministers to suggest that they cannot rationally process the arguments—that they “misunderstand” what these other men are saying. If, on the other hand, those who are promoting these strange doctrines are being “misunderstood”, then, pray tell, whose fault is it? Why are they using obfuscation? And when did they have a problem in being understood prior to this time? I daresay that I don’t fail to understand them. I just don’t believe the things they are promoting.

It is enlightening to realize that they have recently changed their complaint. For the past few years they have said that they are being misunderstood, that we really believe the same things, and that whatever differences exist are minor and inconsequential. Recently, however, one of the leading preachers of this movement wrote that there are “REAL, VITAL differences” (emphasis his) and that we are experiencing a “revival of the truth among Primitive Baptists” in these days. Notice he didn’t say “a revival of interest” or “a revival of zeal”, but “of truth”, indicating that he believes that at some point PB’s had lost “the truth” and that now it was being recovered. So, I wonder, which is it? Are the differences small and immaterial, or are they “real and vital”?

### **Q: What troubles you most about the Calvinistic view of perseverance?**

MG: Without any hesitation, I would say that this view fosters a climate of condescension and judgmentalism. It creates a culture of super-saints, who do everything right—from homeschooling, to raising organic vegetables, to taking notes in church and repeating a catechism—and then proceed to scrutinize the rest of us under a cloak of “concern”. It is not a gospel for sinners, but for the righteous – for people who have all the boxes checked. It sets a person up as a judge to determine whether or not another individual has truly been saved.

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Probably two decades ago, a fellow minister boasted to me that he had been preaching on the marks of the unregenerate and had over half of his church members questioning whether or not they had ever been born again. I was so surprised by his claim that I didn't know how to answer. Today, however, I would ask him, "Well, what will you do when they conclude that they've been deceived all along? Will you take the next logical step and try to convince them to make a decision for Christ? Will you start promoting decisional regeneration?"

I have to admit that this preoccupation with the question of whether a person is born again or not is completely foreign to my frame of reference. It never even enters my mind when I go to a ball game or a school concert to question whether the person beside me is a child of God or not. I simply try to treat every person I meet with respect and try to behave myself as the Lord has called me to behave.

I find the judgmental spirit that calls the eternal destiny of others in question extremely disconcerting. When some of these men began to question the eternal status of various people who attend the church that I pastor because they are not registered Republicans, or because they appreciate "abstract" art, or because they have never made a public profession in baptism, or because they are plain spoken by natural temperament...well, suffice it to say that I didn't take kindly to that form of self-righteous superiority. When people adopt an "I'm-more-spiritual-than-you-because-I-tithe...or homeschool...or wear a bonnet...or make my own bread...or don't have a television...or take notes in church" mindset, a culture of legalism prevails. That kind of psychological manipulation threatens to destroy the church. That's the aspect of this view that troubles me the most. What these people forget is that Sunday-morning sins, like self-righteousness and judgmentalism, are just as heinous in the sight of God as Saturday-night sins, like drunkenness and debauchery.

To be real honest with you, I've found these doctrines extremely depressing. Years ago when I was reading the Puritans, I lost the peace and joy and assurance of my salvation, for I could never feel that I had attained the point that I could say that I was persevering. Try as I might, I could never seem to measure up. The more I examined myself, the more corruption I could see within. Though I was not drinking or cursing or committing adultery, I discovered that I had inner struggles with anger, fear of what people thought of me, unChristian thoughts toward others, struggles with pride, covetousness, worldliness, and more. There was a duplicity about my life, for in my private thoughts I frequently felt cold and unspiritual but in my public demeanor, I gave the appearance of being a committed Christian. I was always conscious of the image I was projecting. Even though I professed that I lived to glorify the Lord and give him all the praise, I was secretly controlled by the fear that others might think me to be unspiritual... I lost all spirit in my preaching and became extremely mechanical. There was no liberty about my life, and everyone around me suffered because I was so strict and rigid. I almost lost my mind, my family, and my joy during those dark days. So, I am a bit gun-shy, if you please, of the kind of

legalism that talks perpetually about joy and love, but seldom elicits a smile. I've tried living under that dark cloud and want no more of it. If that is what Christianity is all about, in all due respect, count me out.

**Q: The argument has been made that modern PB's, with their insistence on the practice of distinguishing between eternal salvation and temporal salvation, have departed from their roots and that these brethren are simply attempting to take the Old Baptists back to the faith of their forefathers—that this emphasis on “perseverance” is what Primitive Baptists originally believed. How do you answer that claim?**

MG: Well, that is the very same argument made by the “missionary” Baptist Throgmorton in the Throgmorton-Potter debate of July 12, 1887 . They debated the question “Who Are the Primitive Baptists?” for four days at Fulton, KY, with Elder Throgmorton claiming that the “missionaries” were holding true to the faith of their fathers, and Elder Potter claiming that the “hardshells” were the original Baptists. Both quoted extensively from history, finding ample evidence for their respective views in ancient Creeds and Confessions. Of course, both sides claimed victory after the discussion. I think that the premise of this claim is the assumption that the 1689 London Baptist Confession is the standard of orthodoxy—the “litmus test” of what our Baptist forefathers believed. That premise is arguable—in fact, it is very suspect. Elder Harold Hunt has written at length on this issue; he does a masterful job of showing that the 1689 was an attempt to construct an ecumenical document for the sake of unifying the English Baptists, but that it was unsuccessful. I believe that the use of Confessions as an instrument to promote unity tends toward credalism. Confessions can promote uniformity, but uniformity is not the same thing as “the unity of the Spirit” (Eph. 4).

I believe that controversy tends to refine theological precision—that is, each new doctrinal crisis forces people to be more precise in doctrine. For that reason, it is a mistake to take any creed from a former time and use it as a canon for orthodoxy today. Isn't it interesting that Landmarkers, Reformed Baptists, Independent Missionary Baptists, the Founders in the Southern Baptist Convention, Sovereign Grace Baptists, Absoluters, and many others all lay claim to the 1689 as a document that supports their beliefs? It is truly an ecumenical document. I told a preacher a few years ago that any ship that requires as many patches to keep it afloat as the 1689 does is not a sea-worthy vessel. I am skeptical of the attempt to make it or any creedal statement the benchmark of orthodoxy.

**Q: Another common criticism is that the terminology of “temporal salvation” and the practice of what you call “rightly dividing the word of truth” in distinguishing between an unconditional eternal salvation and a conditional gospel salvation is a relatively new hermeneutic, or manner of interpreting Scripture – that it’s only been around since about 1900..**

MG: I answer that by saying, first, (1) It is not true. John Gill distinguished between eternal salvation and temporal salvation, and actually used the terminology, numerous times in his commentaries. He lived and ministered in the 1700’s. Furthermore, quotes could be produced from C. H. Cayce showing that his PB grandfather made such distinctions, early in the 1800’s. I would answer secondly, as I just stated, (2) Controversy tends to refine theological precision. Had the Arian controversy never surfaced, there would have been no need to refine and more precisely state Trinitarianism and the Deity of Jesus Christ. The controversy forced them to be exact and distinct on the question of whether the Son was simply “similar” to the Father or whether He was of the “same essence” with the Father. The same is true in this case. The absoluter surge around the beginning of the 20th century was gaining ground. They were claiming that man’s obedience is just as guaranteed and decreed as his regeneration. Men like J. H. Oliphant saw that this view bypassed the moral will of a child of God. That’s why he and other notable ministers in our ranks stated “We believe there is a time salvation, separate and distinct from eternal salvation” in the footnotes to the Fulton documents. I concede that the use of the terminology became more prevalent around 1900, but it was only because the need to make the distinction was forced by the absoluter controversy.

**Q: So, absoluters don’t like the terminology of “conditional time salvation”?**

MG: Absolutely not. Elder R. H. Boaz wrote an entire treatise in 1890-something condemning the use of the term. Elder Silas Durand objected to it and engaged Oliphant in a lengthy written debate on the subject. Even still, absoluters constantly decry the use of the term because they disagree with the concept.

**Q: But I've heard that the term is confusing to people who are not Primitive Baptists? How would you answer that criticism?**

MG: Any term that is unfamiliar to people is confusing to them. When I first read MacArthur's book espousing "Lordship Salvation" in the early 1980's, I didn't know what he meant. But I soon learned. The terms "justification" and "predestination" and "the two natures of Christ" are confusing to people also, but they have the capacity to learn what these terms mean as they are taught. The criticism that we should not use the term "conditional time salvation" because it confuses people is a subterfuge to conceal individual antagonism to the term. Usually a sincere inquirer will ask what you mean and you can then say that it is important in interpreting scripture to distinguish between a person's sonship or relation to God, which is wholly unconditional, and a person's discipleship or fellowship with God, which is conditional on the part of the child of God. If you don't make such a distinction in interpreting Scripture, you will be more confused than a termite in a yo-yo.

**Q: A common criticism is that those who disagree with this effort to reform the Primitive Baptists are being unloving in opposing it. How do you respond to that?**

MG: Well, this is an issue of conscience, and my goal throughout this crisis has been to be true to my conscience while behaving as christianly as I knew how. I have made a conscious effort to avoid invective and inflammatory speech—to deal with issues not personalities—and to do nothing to harm or injure another person. But "neighbor love" is the second commandment for a reason. Our first and greatest responsibility is to "love the Lord with the whole heart"; then, to love others as ourselves—in that order. I believe in treating everyone with kindness, love, and respect. I have no ill-will or animosity toward anyone, nor do I wish to injure the reputation of another preacher, but I am deeply grieved over the churches across the country that have been divided over the introduction of these strange ideas, and as long as I have opportunity, I want to love the Lord and his truth supremely, and I want to love my brethren too – in that order. Love for God necessarily means love for His truth, and sometimes the need to stand firm for the integrity of truth will be perceived as uncharitable toward those who dissent. Perhaps the money-changers whom Christ cast out of the temple would have accused him of being unloving, but that was a case in which love for God must supersede neighbor-love. This current quest to maintain the integrity of PB doctrine is too. Remember, also, that some might say the Lord Jesus was not acting charitably when he castigated the Pharisees in Mt. 23, but zeal for the

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integrity of truth and the house of God was his motive.

Paul makes it clear in Eph. 5 that love for others does not involve tolerance of error or sin. After saying “walk in love” he immediately adds “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness...” The Bible is clear about how to deal with heresies and those who insist on promoting them. It tells us that after labor and the recalcitrance to repent, we are to withdraw, reject, back away. I fail to see how following the Biblical pattern is unloving.

Many, many brethren have labored extensively with these ministers. I have personally had numerous personal visits and exchanged lengthy correspondence with several of them. But they have exhibited a recalcitrance and resistance to counsel and seem determined to pursue an agenda of change regardless of who is hurt in the process. If you ask me, there is nothing more unloving than to take a church that was living together in peace and unity and to split it into sawdust by foisting “reformed theology” upon it. In the interest of change, families have been torn asunder, churches have been divided, and friends have been separated. No, the “troublers of Israel” are not those men who have tried to defend against the influx of these new doctrines, but those who are pushing ahead, come what may, with this effort to remake Primitive Baptists into a more generic and ecumenical Calvinistic group.

After following Mt. 18 (and I could go into detail to document the numerous personal conversations, visits, and correspondence with these brethren, as well as the more formal gatherings in which several ministers have met and corresponded to try to reclaim these erring men) and expending significant labor with them to try to convince them of the error of their ways, I have decided that it is time to obey Romans 16:17 and other passages that instruct me to “mark them that cause offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned and avoid them”. Notice that the text does not say persecute them, or seek to harm them, but to mark and avoid—to back away and withdraw—in order to be true to the convictions of one’s conscience.

Is that unloving? Well, if your little boy had a friend at school that suddenly changed for the worse—he started dressing differently, talking differently, hanging out with a group of kids that were terrorizing the playground, ridiculing and criticizing the values your boy held dear and that this friend also once held, etc., wouldn’t you first advise your son to try to talk to this friend, to try to convince him of the error of his ways? But after that, if this friend continued to demonstrate values that were contrary to your son’s values, wouldn’t you then counsel him to “just leave him alone; don’t mix and mingle with him; just back away; maybe someday he will awaken and return to his former values”? Would that be unloving? No, I think it would be the wise and only appropriate course of action.

What if that friend then came to your son and complained that your son was being unloving? What if he lamented that he was being mistreated by his friends because they refused to fraternize with him any more? Wouldn't you remind your son that this boy was the one who made these decisions to participate with those who were punching other kids in the nose? That he is the person who changed? That he is the one who left his former companions?

We have all bemoaned the fact that our society, in its quest for tolerance, tends to punish the victim and excuse the perpetrator. The true victims of these doctrinal deviations are those who have seen their churches or their families disrupted over the insidious attempt to make proselytes for these views. Those who have promoted these ideas and split these churches are not the victims, they are the perpetrators of the offense. In my opinion, there are few actions more unloving than what they have done to the Lord's people.

**Q: But I'm sure you're aware that a number of people just don't like strife and controversy. They just want brethren to get along. They believe that any expression of disagreement with a fellow believer is unchristian and unkind. How would you answer them?**

MG: Well, that is a problem, isn't it? Even in popular culture, a spirit of pacifism—that is, the idea that “war is never justified”—is gaining influence. We hear it on the news almost every night. I read an article a few years ago—an article, by the way, written by a leading Calvinist named Michael Horton—concerning the growing aversion professing Christians have to the discipline of polemics[1]. He talked about how society's emphasis on the virtue of tolerance was creeping into the thinking of Christian people. He stated that people think it is much more important to be nice than to be right. Then he went to the four gospels and showed how Jesus himself confronted the religious leaders of his day with some very hard-hitting arguments and verbiage, for “the zeal of God's house had eaten him up”. Horton insisted that some things are worth standing for and defending. Paul was set for the defense of the gospel. Jude exhorted the saints to “earnestly contend for the faith that was once delivered to the saints”. Titus was exhorted to resist the influx of false doctrine, and the Galatians were warned of the danger of being influenced by the subtleties of legalistic teaching. The bottom line is that a person cannot be true to the Lord if he fails to stand fast in the faith, with an iron resolve, masculine courage, and unflinching commitment to the truth of Christ.

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Written by Michael Gowens

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I don't think a person can be faithful to Christ if he fails to take a stand in the day of crisis. Martin Luther once said, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest expression every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides, is mere flight and disgrace, if he flinches at that point." Too much of the New Testament exhorts us to be steadfast in the faith to simply ignore.

Now I agree that it is important to engage in polemics without becoming a downright nasty person. I know that it matters how one says something and that all things are to be done with charity. And I have tried to be careful to behave myself with the utmost concern for the reputation of others. Neither I nor any of the brethren who share my convictions have initiated this conflict. But we've not hesitated to counter every attempt to advance these divisive ideas. I've told several people, "If you don't like the tension, don't get mad at me. I didn't start it. Be upset with the men who have changed their position and are trying to change the Old Baptists. Tell them that you don't appreciate the strife that has been caused by the attempt to convince PB's that they've been wrong for the past 100 years."

I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't like controversy either, but I am convinced that this particular issue is worth defending. I believe that if good men fail to stand firmly at this critical moment, then the Primitive Baptists as I've always known them will cease to exist. They will simply be amalgamated, like another face in the crowd, into the modern movement of ecumenical Calvinism.

**Q: You stated that much of this crisis originated from exposure to the writings of men who are not Primitive Baptists. I noticed though that you just quoted Martin Luther. Do you object to reading the books of others or listening to their sermons or radio programs?**

MG: Absolutely not. I read widely and listen to Christian radio every day. I just believe it is important to be discerning and not gullible, not to become "star struck" by these Christian celebrities so that we start mimicking them. I've listened to several of our ministers in recent years and said to myself, "He's been reading John Piper," or "He's been listening to John MacArthur." When someone starts talking about "exploring the contours of God's character" or in virtually every sermon repeats the Piper mantra, "God is most glorified in us when we are

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most satisfied in Him”, it is pretty evident that they are being inordinately influenced. You expect this kind of imitation from someone that is young and impressionable, but not from men who are supposed to be mature and committed Primitive Baptists.

**Q: Where do you think this will lead? Where is it heading? Is a “division” in the making?**

MG: No. There is no “division” here. There is a “departure” – a departure from the faith — by a relatively small group of PB’s. People sometimes have the impression that PB’s are pretty well evenly divided. That’s not true. There are really only about two dozen ministers who are intrigued by reformed theology. People may have the impression that it is more widespread, but they shouldn’t mistake the circulation of a single media ministry as evidence that PB’s endorse these outlandish views. It is not representative of where PB’s are.

In fact, in any State you might name, I could name perhaps one or two churches that are caught up in this attempt to remake the Old Baptists, but scores, or even hundreds, that are still committed to walking in the old paths, wherein is the good way.

For instance, Georgia has probably three churches in the north and two in the south that are either teaching or tolerating Calvinism. That leaves several hundred who are not. Tennessee has maybe two or three, but the multitude is true to the old doctrine and practice. The overwhelming majority of Alabama churches are standing firm for the truth. In fact, when one of these men split the oldest church in Alabama and constituted his own church with the members he drew away, he could only get one Alabama minister to sit in the presbytery for the constitution service. The rest of the presbyters were imported from other states. Interestingly, the ministers who attended that event and supported the maverick group are pretty close to the entire group, give or take one or two, of the current dissenters.

If you had a church with 100 members and 3 departed, you wouldn’t call that a “division”. Even so, the 3-5% of those who insist on initiating change in the church are those who have “departed”.

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Whatever happens, my goal is to continue to follow the same course I've been following. I don't believe in persecuting detractors. Live and let live. They are free to believe as they please; however, they are not free to compel me to accept and tolerate their views even to the violation of my conscience, or free to further harm our churches with their strange doctrines. Choices have consequences, and if they insist on promoting an agenda of change, it is not right to expect me to continue as if nothing has changed. Conscience compels me to resist what I believe to be error, and to continue to try to be true and faithful to the light God has given me. I think it is unethical to expect immunity from opposition while continuing to push ahead with an agenda of change. To cry "foul" because others presume to challenge those who admit that they have changed, while defending those whose assaults on truth have been relentless is a double standard.

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[1] po-lem-ic (pelem'ik) n-1 an argument, dispute, etc., especially a written one, that supports one opinion or body of ideas in opposition to another (The New Scholastic Dictionary of American English).

[Click here to read an article entitled \*Ten Reasons Primitive Baptists Are Not Calvinists\* by Elder Michael Gowens and Elder Lonnie Mozingo, Jr.](#)