

The New Calvinism: A Critical Assessment

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I am not a fan of the New Calvinism, as it is called, and where I am most concerned about it is in those very points of its departure from the old (historic) Calvinism. Though I have been asked to write this article, I am rather reluctant to do so for several reasons, and I think that I need to begin with these.

1. *This is a movement which is not easily defined.* Its leaders and main proponents differ in their own understanding of it, and no one, it seems, is ready to build a wall around it; indeed, the very nature of the New Calvinism appears to be inclusive rather than exclusive.
2. *This is a movement whose leaders (with a few notable exceptions) cannot be identified precisely.* Lists of its leaders and supporters usually include many Calvinists of the older, more traditional variety.
3. *There is considerable error, I believe, in much that has been written about this movement.* I will endeavour in this article not to contribute more of the same, though I am not certain that at every point I will succeed. It is in my view not a movement at all, but an assortment of several smaller movements, each one a hybrid as it attaches itself to something else, including some recent trends in theology and church practice which are decidedly not Calvinistic. A major part of this present paper will be devoted to some of these.
4. *I am far happier writing about something which I am eager to promote.* There are some things that are good about the New Calvinism, and I do not wish to overlook that, but, in the midst of all the excitement and optimism, someone needs to sound the alarm on its dangers. As disagreeable as such a task may be, the urgency of it is too great to be ignored, and so I offer my own impressions and critique.

Neo-Calvinism vs. Neo-Puritanism

There are different factions within the New Calvinism, and two of the more prominent ones have been dubbed Neo-Puritanism and Neo-Calvinism. The Neo-Puritans are said to be led by John Piper and Mark Driscoll, who focus on the sovereignty of God in salvation, emphasizing evangelism and personal conversion as the means of fulfilling God's redemptive purpose. The historical figure revered by this group is Jonathan Edwards, although it is probably better to say that it is Edwards as interpreted by Piper.

The Neo-Calvinists, in contrast, are said to be led by Tim Keller and Gabe Lyons, who focus on the sovereignty of God over creation, emphasizing the cultural mandate and the restoration of creation as the means of fulfilling God's redemptive purpose. One of the historical figures revered by this group is Abraham Kuyper, who spearheaded a new kind of Calvinism at the turn of the last century. Kuyper embraced the notion of presumptive regeneration, a view of the covenant which regards everyone in the congregation (not only professing Christians, but their children also) as regenerate, or at least until the contrary should become evident. This view sees little need for discriminatory preaching in the churches. Clearly, matters of evangelism and spiritual awakening would not be a priority, whether in or out of the church, and it is but a short step from there to touting the cultural mandate (filling, subduing, and ruling over the earth), rather than the calling of sinners to Christ, as the primary mission of the church as light to a dark world. Taken from his Stone Lectures of 1898, Kuyper stated: "That in spite of all worldly opposition, God's holy ordinances shall be established again in the home, in the school and in the state for the good of the people; to carve as it were into the conscience of the nation the ordinances of the Lord, to which Bible and creation bear witness, until the nation bears homage again to him."

To separate too sharply like this, however, between the sovereignty of God in salvation and His sovereignty over creation, almost as if to pit one against the other, has the effect of obscuring the facts rather than clarifying them. The Scriptures plainly teach that God is sovereign over the whole creation (Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:11), that He is so for the eternal wellbeing of His people (Rom. 8:28,32), and, ultimately, for the praise of His glorious grace to them in Christ (Eph. 2:7). Even His common grace to everyone serves the purpose of bestowing His redeeming grace on His elect (Gen. 8:22; Matt. 13:24-30). Since the fall of man into sin, which has brought a curse upon the earth (Gen. 3:17-19), priority must be given to evangelism for the cultural mandate to be achieved (2 Sam. 23:3; Ps. 111:10). The curse upon the earth will finally be lifted, and creation will be delivered from the bondage of corruption, only when the glorious liberty of the sons of God is at last revealed (Rom. 8:19-23). This is not to

say that Christians are not to serve as salt and light in the world until then, or that progress may not be made in terms of what William Wilberforce called “a reformation of manners” by doing so – probably more progress at certain times than at others – but we will not see that blessing in all its fullness until the new heavens are created, along with the new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:10-18).

Piper and the Neo-Puritans

I do not deny that these factions exist within the New Calvinism, but there is more to this story which is too often overlooked, bringing even the terms “Neo-Puritanism” and “Neo-Calvinism” into serious question. Let us begin with John Piper and his concept of Christian hedonism. He makes this foundational to his ministry. Though I have profound respect for Piper, I see no connection between his Christian hedonism and the Puritans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Piper himself acknowledges, he takes this notion from the writings of Blaise Pascal, and to some degree from C.S. Lewis. One might be happier had he found it in the scriptures, but that would be considerably more difficult to do. Piper summarizes Christian hedonism by stating that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him. But, surely, it is better to turn that around, to say that we are most satisfied in Him when He is most glorified in us, when we seek by His grace to do all to the honour and glory of God.

Moreover, it is misleading to say that the kind of Christianity which Piper and Driscoll represent with such passion is Neo-Puritanism when it is so saturated with the principles and practices of the Church Growth Movement. These leaders do not take a stand, for example, on the regulative principle of worship, but employ a very seeker-friendly style in their assemblies and conferences. Driscoll insists that he is seeker-hostile and seeker-insensitive, but there is no question that his shock-approach and vulgarity in the pulpit are carefully designed to get people’s attention and to influence their thinking by any means that he can. It is not a Puritan practice to promote oneself in this way, or to rely on one’s own resources to change public opinion, but to humble oneself rather under the mighty hand of God, committing everything to Him who judges righteously.

This so-called Neo-Puritanism is also closely aligned with the Charismatic Movement. Its proponents insist that the extraordinary (miraculous) gifts of the Spirit have continued to our own day, and that we need not fear to see this work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. The Puritans who did not fear the work of the Spirit at all, but fervently prayed to see more of it, did not share this view.

We see another close tie, this time with New Covenant Theology. These New Calvinists may be strong on certain doctrines, such as the substitutionary atonement and justification by faith, but they are very weak on sanctification -- too weak to be thought of as heirs of the Puritans. What is Puritanism if it does not seek to raise the bar on sanctification? Many of the New Calvinists embrace New Covenant Theology, not recognizing therefore any continuing place for the Ten Commandments or any of the rigorous demands of godliness. Not all these leaders and their followers are cut from the same cloth, of course, but the practical Christianity of the Puritans is sadly lacking in the lives of too many of the New Calvinists, and it is not what they are calling out for in their preaching. Greg Dutcher addresses this problem to some degree in his book, *Killing Calvinism*, and it is a serious matter of the heart which demands the careful attention of us all. Let us learn to live before God, rather than before men. Let us put our own house in order before teaching others to do so. And, in contending for the faith, let us do so graciously. This has always been the Puritan way.

Keller and the Neo-Calvinists

On the other side, the kind of Christianity that Keller (and others) actively promote, though connected with the Neo-Calvinism of Kuyper, and with the dominionism of the Christian Reconstructionists, is clearly laced with other less-friendly associations, too. On one level, I find the writings of Tim Keller and Michael Goheen rather helpful, and even insightful at times. Their “story-arc” (as they call it) of “creation - sin - redemption - restoration” brings to mind some of the struggles that I have experienced in my own life in seeking to live as a Christian in an increasingly pagan society, first when I attended a secular university, then when I had to learn to defend my faith at a liberal seminary, and even later on when I tried to minister to people in some of my churches who had imbibed far more of the world than they had of biblical principles and the rudiments of Christ.

At the same time, however, one does also find some very disturbing features in their writings. They quote extensively, for instance, from liberal scholars, including Lesslie Newbigin (Goheen’s favourite), who is also the

most-quoted author in the Emergent Church Movement. Why would anybody want to base so much of his thinking on the ideas of a man who was not committed to the authority of Holy Scripture, and who believed that everyone's interpretation of the scriptures (except possibly his own) was too culturally conditioned ever to be right? These liberal scholars have clearly made a great impact on these New Calvinists, and even some of the language that these newer authors use, such as "seeking justice and shalom," is very reminiscent of the Social Gospel Movement.

The problem does not end there. Some of the ideas on restoration by these New Calvinists may add an important footnote to the mission of the church, but they go beyond that, making cultural impact and the ultimate restoration of the earth the main thrust of the church's mission to a fallen world. The primary purpose of salvation, according to Keller, is not the calling of lost souls out of darkness, not the establishment of Christ's kingdom, not the building of His church, nor the preparation of His people to be the bride of Christ, but to make this world a better place. Think about that. As Christian hedonism is to Piper, so is this "better world" foundational to Keller's ministry. The ramifications of such a vision are enormous, and we must not underestimate the effects of such teaching on the next generation.

Now to contextualization, which is another recurring theme and emphasis among these New Calvinists. The seminary that I went to embraced the Newbigin brand of contextualization forty years ago, and I think would approve of the New Calvinists who employ it today, even though it is presented by them with a more conservative stamp and appears therefore to be somewhat traditional. But what, exactly, is it? If contextualization is the reason for Paul circumcising Timothy, but not Titus, so that Timothy might minister the gospel more effectively to Jews – in other words, if it is his becoming all things to all people, that by all means he might save some – then surely, it is a good thing. But the evidence shows something else. Contextualizing is the business of adapting the message to the culture, which in practice involves not only objective translation but subjective interpretation and compromise.

Keller, for instance, is a theistic evolutionist who thinks that parts of Genesis must be interpreted so as not to conflict with what he thinks is contrary to science. He says that Genesis 1 has the earmarks of poetry and is therefore a 'song' about the wonder and meaning of God's creation, and that God guided some kind of process of natural selection as a biological mechanism to bring the world into being. In Keller's world, where death precedes Adam's fall, there are major clashes, not only with what we are told has happened (Heb. 11:3), but with the gospel itself in its account of the two Adams (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15). In contrast, Paul states that he is not ashamed of the gospel, that his preaching was not with persuasive words of human wisdom to the end that faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God, and he warns against what is according to the basic principles of the world (including, therefore, this kind of contextualization) and not according to Christ.

One more point, which to my mind is equally disturbing, is that Keller denies the exclusive claims of Christ and allows that God may have a trap door for unbelievers. When asked by NBC's Martin Bashir if all the millions of Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Jews who die without Christ are going to hell, Keller answered that he does not know, that perhaps there is a trap door that he does not know anything about. Quite apart from the fact that this seriously undermines the urgency of Christian missions, it also contradicts what is so clearly and repeatedly taught in the Scriptures, and what Keller must surely be aware of, that no one comes to the Father except through Christ His Son (Jn. 3:36; 5:23; 14:6; Acts 4:12). Keller keeps insisting that the main story of the Bible, what it tells us about Christ, must not be changed, but, once again, it seems that there is room even here for revision.

Conclusion

I stated earlier that there are some things which are good about the New Calvinism, and by now one may well question whether I really believe that. But of course I am delighted that there is bold preaching again on the sovereignty of God, on the grace of God in salvation, and on complementarianism (carefully distinguishing between the roles of men and women). What lover of the Lord and His Word would not rejoice in such developments? Indeed, I would very much like to be more positive about this movement than I am, embracing the optimistic view of so many others that it may improve over time, but, as history has demonstrated repeatedly, truth mixed with error has a detrimental effect in the long run.

I am reminded of Spurgeon and the Downgrade Controversy. The Baptist Union had nothing holding it together except the one doctrine of baptism by immersion. In 1888, Spurgeon wrote in the *Sword and Trowel*, "If I

disagree with a man on ninety-nine points, but happen to be one with him in baptism, this can never furnish such ground of unity as I have with another with whom I believe in ninety-nine points, and only happen to differ upon (that).” Similarly, TULIP (and sometimes it is not even the whole flower) is not enough, it seems to me, to hold the New Calvinism together. There are those who are eagerly working to make it a united movement, rather than a series of smaller hybrid movements, even to the point of trying to pull people like Rick Warren into the mix, but all such attempts will surely fracture this phenomenon even more.

The unmistakable fact of the matter is that Calvinism is much more than merely the five points. It is, beyond knowing God, embracing everything that He has revealed about Himself in creation and in Holy Scripture. It is being in awe of His sovereignty, thankful for His holiness, ashamed of one’s own corruption in contrast to that, and it eagerly celebrates His electing love and the riches of His saving grace in that, while one was yet a sinner, with nothing that he could do for himself to win the approval of a righteous God, the Lord sent His Christ, His own dear Son, into the world to fulfil the demands of His covenant in the sinner’s place, to make him His son and heir with Christ, and a beneficiary of His everlasting favour. Calvinism is a set of doctrines, yes, but it is also a way of life, a life that hates sin but loves the Word and all the ways of God, a sanctified life that is lived in grateful response for His goodness and mercy, for His unfailing compassions which are new every morning, and seeks to present oneself as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, whose glorious coming he anticipates and whose praises he longs to sing for all eternity. Calvinism serves a holy God, and so seeks to worship Him in a reverent manner, with simplicity, sincerity, not adding to or taking from what God has commanded.

Over one hundred years ago, B.B. Warfield wrote (and it is reprinted in his Selected Shorter Writings), that “Calvinism is just religion in its purity. We have only, therefore, to conceive of religion in its purity, and that is Calvinism.” This may sound somewhat simplistic, but it does set forth, and rather beautifully, what needs to be stated at the present time, that Calvinism, the genuine article, will not seek to align itself with passing fads and fancies (as what is known as Neo-Puritanism is doing), on the one hand, nor will it seek the company and counsel of those whose wisdom is of this world (as today’s Neo-Calvinism is doing), on the other.

Let “old Calvinists” beware, and not be too quick and eager to throw in their support for something that further investigation would reveal is really less than what it ought to be. I am not saying that we have to agree on everything. We should not hesitate, for instance, if we wish to hold conferences with people who insist on a different mode of baptism than is our own practice. (Please note what Spurgeon said above.) But we should insist on something more than the five points.