

SBC leader says Calvinism steadily dividing church

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [November 15, 2011](#) issue

A Southern Baptist Convention official says one of the top challenges facing the nation's second largest faith group (after Roman Catholics) is the increasing influence of Calvinism in churches. Frank Page, who heads the Nashville-based SBC Executive Committee, sees the theological divide as "a tremendous challenge for us."

Page, who served as SBC president from 2006 to 2008, said he regularly receives communications from congregations struggling over this issue. His remarks appeared October 18 in a blog interview on the SBC Today website.

"Everyone is aware of this, but few want to talk about this in public," elaborated Page, who assumed the post of president and CEO of the SBC fiduciary and executive agency last year. "At some point we are going to see the challenges which are ensuing from this divide become even more problematic for us."

A former South Carolina pastor, Page wrote an 80-page booklet in 2000 titled *Trouble with the TULIP: A Closer Examination of the Five Points of Calvinism*. In it he termed Calvinism a "man-made" doctrine not supported by scripture and defended what he called "the true teachings of grace."

The book countered a common acronym for the five main points of Calvinism, a theological model named after Protestant reformer John Calvin. They are: total depravity, unmerited election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints.

Page presented

an alternative acronym, GRACE: "Given through Christ, rejected through rebellion, accepted through faith and Christ died for all" that summarized four points of a counterview of Calvinism called Arminianism. Page's final "E" departed from Arminian thought with "everlasting life/security of the believer," a Calvinist doctrine held by most Southern Baptists, often described as "once saved, always saved."

Renewed interest in Calvinism, also known as Reformed theology, began with influential leaders, including Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Albert Mohler, who view it as a healthy return to Southern Baptists' historic roots.

Others see it as a negative trend that threatens to take over the convention in a manner similar to the "conservative resurgence" of the late 20th century. That is a phrase used to describe a movement that redirected the more moderate and mainstream theology held by many SBC leaders before the 1980s toward the biblical inerrancy stance that now holds sway.

Page, who has a Ph.D. from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, claims he is neither Calvinist nor Arminian and says there needs to be honest dialogue between the camps.

A 2007 LifeWay Research study found that about 10 percent of rank-and-file pastors considered themselves five-point Calvinists. Among recent seminary graduates the number grew to 29 percent, suggesting that the small but increasing number of Calvinist-led churches will continue to grow.

In a 2007 article in Baptist Press, then-SBC President Page urged seminary graduates to be honest with pastor search committees about their views on Calvinism and for churches to be similarly honest about what teachings they will allow.

Associated Baptist Press recently reported on a court case stemming from efforts by two Calvinist pastors to impose elder rule on a Florida Baptist church. Several former members claimed in a lawsuit that the new leadership violated the church's articles of incorporation filed with the secretary of state, but Florida's First District Court of Appeals ruled that church governance is "an essentially religious matter" that courts cannot enjoin due to the separation of church and state. —ABP