

A Brief Explanation of the Doctrine of the Calvary Chapel Movement

by Larry Taylor

HISTORY

Calvary Chapel began in the late 1960's as a small non-denominational church of 25 members pastored by Chuck Smith. As we approach the turn of the century, Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa is home to some 30,000 believers, The Word for Today publishes Bible study books and tapes all over the world, KWVE broadcasts God's Word to all of Southern California, and Calvary Chapel's Bible College provides Bible education to thousands at its home campus in Twin Peaks, California and at over 20 extension campuses worldwide.

Because of its size and influence, many Christians have asked exactly what Calvary Chapel believes, what makes it distinctive, what sets it apart from other Christian groups. At Calvary Chapel, we have always been hesitant to try and answer those questions, not because we are unsure of our beliefs, but because we are cautious to avoid division within the Body of Christ. After all, what really matters is what we have in common as Christians: the "essential" doctrines of the infallibility of God's Word, the virgin birth of Christ, His sinless life, death for our sins, bodily resurrection, ascension to glory, and personal return to rule the earth. These are the essence of Christianity, and agreed upon by virtually all born again believers.

When we move away from the essential doctrines to those that are less essential we risk setting barriers up in the church, something we at Calvary Chapel have no desire to do. Still, Calvary Chapel is distinct from denominational churches and other Protestant groups and people want to know what those distinctions are.

That is the purpose of this little booklet.

It is not our purpose to cause division or discord in the Body of Christ, conversely, we long for unity among God's people of all persuasions, and we allow for a great deal of flexibility even within our own ranks.

Calvary Chapel pastors are not clones who all believe exactly the same thing. Still, there are distinctions that make Calvary Chapel unique and which define our mission.

THE BALANCE

In a broad general sense, Calvary Chapel is the middle ground between fundamentalism and Pentecostalism in modern Protestant theology. In fact, we believe that this is at least part of the reason why God has raised up this ministry.

Fundamentalism is that portion of Protestantism which holds to the literal interpretation of the Scriptures, believing that they are divinely inspired and inerrant. Hence, the “fundamentals” of the faith are emphasized. Although the modern news media and the liberal church scorn fundamentalists as backwards and stupid, the truth is that fundamentalism has preserved the integrity of God’s Word and held on to the essential doctrines of the orthodox faith.

Pentecostalism as a modern movement grew out of the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles at the turn of the 20th century, and spawned denominations that emphasize the fullness of the Holy Spirit and the exercise of spiritual and Scriptural gifts of the Spirit which had fallen dormant in the main line churches. Also criticized by the liberal church and news media as being emotionally driven, Pentecostalism restored to the church the importance of gifts of the Spirit and the power of God for the believer today.

Over the years, however, fundamentalism, while it clung to the integrity of God’s Word, tended to become rigid, legalistic, and unaccepting of spiritual gifts. Similarly, Pentecostalism became enthusiastic and emotional at the expense of the teaching of God’s Word.

Calvary Chapel is the balance between the two. At Calvary Chapel we believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Bible, and we encourage their exercise, but always decently and in order, and with the primary emphasis on the Word of God which we look to as our primary rule of faith.

To quote Pastor Chuck Smith: “We believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Scriptures, and that they are valid for today if they are exercised within the Scriptural guidelines. We as believers are to covet the best gifts, seeking to exercise them in love that the whole Body of Christ might be edified. We believe that love is more important than the most spectacular gifts, and without this love all exercise of spiritual gifts is worthless.”

Because of this balance, Calvary Chapel services are designed to be centered around the verse by verse teaching of God’s Word, and special “after glow” services are provided where the gifts of the Holy Spirit can operate freely under the leadership of mature Christians. Many Pentecostals think Calvary Chapel is not

emotional enough, and many fundamentalists think Calvary Chapel is too emotional. That balance is indication, in my opinion, that we are right where God wants us to be.

CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Calvary Chapel also differs from most mainline churches in its style of church government. Most denominational churches maintain either a congregational form of church government, a Presbyterian form, or an Episcopal form of running their churches. These three terms should not be confused with the denominations that bear the same names because other churches of different names share the same styles of government.

The congregational form of church government is an American invention and appeals to our American sense of democracy. Basically, the congregation as a whole makes all decisions in these churches by voting on matters of importance and appointing committees from its ranks to run the daily operation of the church.

Most Congregational, Baptist, Pentecostal, Brethren, and non-denominational churches are organized in this fashion. The congregation votes on hiring a pastor, votes on how to spend the money, and on anything else of importance. Although democratic people like the idea, congregational forms of church government often wind up at best causing the pastor to be directed by the sheep he is supposed to lead, and at worst reducing the pastor to a hireling.

The Episcopal form of church government, used by Episcopalian, Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox, and Methodist churches (to name a few) is controlled by a church hierarchy which may have differing names. Basically, there is a bishop, or someone of similar stature if called by a different name, who oversees the churches, appoints pastors to pulpits, sets policy, and guides the vision of the local congregations. Unfortunately, this style of government, which grew out of European monarchies, leaves little freedom for the local pastor or congregation to follow the leading of the Spirit.

The Presbyterian form of church government, which is typical in Presbyterian and Reformed churches, puts the decisions of church polity in the hands of a select group of elders (the “presbytery”) who are appointed in various different ways, depending on the church. These elders are over the pastor, who in turn is over the congregation. The problem here too is that this system puts the God-appointed leader, the pastor, under some of those he is supposed to lead.

Calvary Chapels are organized differently. Church government at Calvary Chapel is very simple, not a complex bureaucracy, committees and sub-committees are essentially non-existent. Basically, at Calvary Chapel we believe that the pastor is responsible for the church, responsible to hear from God, and responsible to feed and love His people faithfully. Elders are appointed in the larger churches to help the pastor care for the spiritual needs of the congregation, as are deacons to help the pastor care for the material needs of the church.

In addition, our churches have church boards as required by most states which vary in size depending on the size of the church, and which usually are made up of mature Christian businessmen who can advise the pastor with respect to the business operations and decisions of the church such as property management and investments. At Calvary Chapel, church organization is de-emphasized, and only the organization that is needed to run the church is instituted. The pastor guides the church as he is lead by the Holy Spirit, and we trust God to put pastors where He wants them to be.

DOCTRINE

At Calvary Chapel we believe in all the fundamental doctrines of the evangelical Protestant church. For example, we believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, that the Bible, Old and New Testaments, is the inspired, infallible Word of God and is the final authority concerning sexual preferences, marriage, divorce, raising children, as well as but not limited to all other issues of life.

WE BELIEVE that God is eternally existent in three separate persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe that God the father is the personal, transcendent, and sovereign creator of all things.

WE BELIEVE that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, that He was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, provided for the atonement of our sins by His vicarious death on the Cross, was bodily resurrected by the power of the Holy Spirit, ascended back to the right hand of God the father, and ever lives to make intercession for us.

After He ascended to Heaven, Jesus poured out His Holy Spirit on the believers in Jerusalem, enabling them to fulfill His command to preach the Gospel to the entire world, an obligation shared by all believers today.

WE BELIEVE that all people are by nature separated from God and responsible for their own sin, but that salvation, redemption, and forgiveness of sin are freely offered to all by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. When a person repents of sin

and accepts Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord, trusting Him to save, that person is immediately born again and sealed by the Holy Spirit, all his/her sins are forgiven, and that person becomes a child of God, destined to spend eternity with the Lord.

As we previously mentioned, we believe in the proper Scriptural exercise of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Bible, the greatest gift of all being God's love.

At Calvary Chapel, we await the pre-tribulation rapture of the church. Calvary Chapel is strongly committed to a belief that the church will be raptured before the seven year tribulation period described in Revelation chapters 6 through 18. We recognize that other believers hold a different view, but this is the way we see the Scripture's teaching on this subject.

WE BELIEVE that the second coming of Jesus Christ with His saints to rule on the earth will be personal, pre-millennial, and visible. This motivates us to heartfelt worship, committed service, diligent study of God's Word, regular fellowship with other Christians, and participation in both adult baptisms by immersion and in Holy Communion.

Calvary Chapel rejects the teaching of "amillennialism" which spiritualizes Scripture and denies the literal 1,000 year reign of Christ on the earth as described in Revelation chapter 20.

WHAT WE DO NOT BELIEVE

At Calvary Chapel, we reject some popular doctrines of some Christian groups because we believe them to be in error scripturally. This does not mean that we will not fellowship with those holding these views; it simply means that such views are outside the boundaries of what constitutes a Calvary Chapel church.

For example, we reject, as we have already mentioned, "amillennialism", post-millennialism, as well as a mid or post-tribulation rapture view. At Calvary Chapel, we are strongly pre-millennialists and pre-tribulation rapturists.

We also reject the belief, held by some Pentecostals and charismatics, that Christians can be demon possessed. The Scripture says "greater is He that is in you than he who is in the world" which makes no sense if a believer can be simultaneously indwelt by both the Holy Spirit and evil spirits. Christians can be attacked by demons, but they cannot be possessed or controlled by them.

In addition, we reject "5-point Calvinism". For a deeper understanding of what Calvinism is, see Chuck Smith's book Calvinism versus Arminianism, but for our purposes here, suffice it to say that Calvary Chapel rejects two of the five points of five point Calvinism. First, Calvinism teaches that Jesus' atonement on the Cross was limited, that is, that He died only for a chosen group, His "elect", not for the sins of the entire world.

At Calvary Chapel, we believe that Jesus died on the Cross for all the sins of all people, and that anyone who wants to can accept Him as Lord and savior and be born again. Strict five point Calvinists believe that only the elect can be saved and that God has elected others to spend eternity in hell.

Secondly, we reject the Calvinistic teaching called "irresistible grace", which is the belief that man cannot, even if he wants to, resist the wooing and calling of God to salvation. Instead, at Calvary Chapel we believe that man has a free will and he can resist the call of God if he chooses to do so. Therefore, those who hold to five point Calvinism are outside of the borders of what defines Calvary Chapel.

At Calvary Chapel, we also reject the teaching of "positive confession" which is the doctrine put forth by the faith movement teachers that says that we as human beings can have unlimited health and wealth because we, like God, have the ability to create our own reality by the confession of our lips. These people teach that if a person will confess health and wealth consistently, then that is what they will have, and, conversely, the Christian living in sickness or poverty is settling for less than his full inheritance in Christ.

At Calvary Chapel, we believe that many believers both in the Bible and in daily life are often afflicted not because their confession is wrong, but simply because we live in a foreign world. We believe that the health and prosperity doctrine is a perversion of Scripture and is often used to fleece the flock of God. We do not believe that God can be commanded by man to heal or provide, but that we must always submit to His perfect will even in affliction.

Additionally, we reject the teaching that uses human prophecy to supersede the Word of God. There are some Christian groups around which claim to have prophets and apostles of equal validity with those who wrote the Bible. Moreover, they claim that the prophetic utterances from these people take precedence over the Word of God.

At Calvary Chapel, we believe that the Bible is the final authority and the complete Word of God for His church today, and that no prophecy, teaching or laws placed by government can ever supersede it.

Some churches have incorporated human secular psychology and philosophy into their teaching programs, creating sermons that are more based on secular humanistic theory than on the Word of God. While we respect our fellow believers who work in mental health related fields, we at Calvary Chapel believe that the central mission of the church is to proclaim God's Word to a lost and hurting world. Moreover, it has been our experience that humanistic psychology and philosophy often do more harm than good, and people respond best when God's Word is proclaimed in the power and love of the Holy Spirit. It is God's Word that changes lives for the better.

At Calvary Chapels our services remain centered on the teaching of the Bible. This is not to imply that we object to the work of the many dedicated Christian mental health professionals; conversely, we thank God for them. Our point is simply that in our church services, we emphasize the teaching of God's Word.

And finally, as we have mentioned before, Calvary Chapel rejects the over-emphasis of spiritual gifts and experiential signs and wonders to the exclusion of Biblical teaching. Again, we are a Bible based ministry that avoids programs and gimmicks in favor of the simple teaching of the Word of God in love to His people. In our services, we focus on a personal relationship with God through worship, prayer, and the teaching of the Word of God. We offer both expository and topical studies; we do not allow speaking in tongues loudly during services because we do not believe that the Holy Spirit would interrupt Himself.

WORSHIP

Many people are under the impression that a particular style of worship is insisted upon at Calvary Chapel, that style being the soft contemporary Sound made popular by Maranatha! Music and by Asaph Records (which both originated at Calvary Chapel). Although most Calvary Chapels do utilize a form of contemporary worship, there is actually a great variety of styles Of Music found in our churches. Some are very traditional and conservative, with organs or pianos and hymns, while others prefer electric guitars and drums. There is no set style of worship which makes a Calvary Chapel unique; instead there is wide latitude in expression. All of us desire, of course, that whatever the style of worship, it come from our hearts.

Similarly, some of the worship services at Calvary Chapels are quite traditional, while others are more contemporary. Some of our churches are filled with elderly people in suits and ties, some are filled with young people in jeans and tee shirts, and many are a combination of all different ages, styles, and races of folks who come together with one common focus: love for Jesus Christ and the desire to know Him more intimately.

I recently spoke at one of the larger Calvary Chapel affiliates where seven different ethnic groups of people who range in age from teens to quite elderly gather every week filled with the love of Jesus. That is typical of a Calvary Chapel church. Most are places where anybody with any style of dress or musical taste or culture feels welcome.

STATEMENT OF FAITH

To better help people not familiar with the Calvary Chapel ministries understand who we are, we at Calvary Chapel's Bible College developed the following statement of faith, most of which was written by, and all of which was approved by Pastor Chuck Smith, the founder of the Calvary Chapel movement, pastor of Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa, and President of the Bible College.

Calvary Chapel has been formed as a fellowship of believers in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Our supreme desire is to know Christ and be conformed to His image by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are not a denominational church, nor are we opposed to denominations as such, only to their over-emphasis of the doctrinal differences that have led to the division of the Body of Christ.

We believe the only true basis of Christian fellowship is Christ's (Agape) love, which is greater than any differences we possess, and without which we have no right to claim ourselves Christians.

We believe worship of God should be spiritual. Therefore, we remain flexible and yielded to the leading of the Holy Spirit to direct our worship.

We believe worship of God should be inspirational. Therefore, we give great place to music in our worship.

We believe worship of God should be intelligent. Therefore, our services are designed with great emphasis upon the teaching of the Word of God that He might instruct us how He should be worshipped.

We believe worship of God should be fruitful. Therefore, we look for His love in our lives as the supreme manifestation that we have been truly worshipping Him.

We believe in all the fundamental doctrines of orthodox evangelical Christianity.

We believe in the inerrancy of Scripture, that the Bible, Old and New Testaments are the inspired, infallible Word of God and is the final authority concerning sexual preferences, marriage, divorce, raising children, as well as but not limited to all other issues of life and that no laws enacted or established by any government supersede the Bible.

We believe that God is eternally existent in three separate persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We believe that God the Father is the personal, transcendent, and sovereign Creator of all things.

We believe that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human, that He was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, provided for the atonement of our sins by His vicarious death on the Cross, was bodily resurrected by the power of the Holy Spirit, ascended back to the right hand of God the Father, and ever lives to make intercession for us.

After Jesus ascended to Heaven, He poured out His Holy Spirit on the believers in Jerusalem, enabling them to fulfill His command to preach the Gospel to the entire world, an obligation shared by all believers today.

We believe that all people are by nature separated from God and responsible for their own sin, but that salvation, redemption, and forgiveness are freely offered to all by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. When a person repents of sin and accepts Jesus Christ as personal Savior and Lord, trusting Him to save, that person is immediately born again and sealed by the Holy Spirit, all his/her sins are forgiven, and that person becomes a child of God, destined to spend eternity with the Lord.

We believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Scriptures, and that they are valid for today if they are exercised within the Scriptural guidelines. We as believers are to covet the best gifts, seeking to exercise them in love that the whole Body of Christ might be edified. We believe that love is more important than the most spectacular gifts, and without this love all exercise of spiritual gifts is worthless.

We believe that church government should be simplistic rather than a complex

bureaucracy, and we depend on the Holy Spirit to lead, rather than on fleshly promotion.

We await the pre-tribulation rapture of the church, and we believe that the second coming of Christ with His saints to rule on the earth will be personal, pre-millennial, and visible. This motivates us to holy living, heartfelt worship, committed service, diligent study of God's Word, regular fellowship, and participation in adult baptism by immersion and Holy Communion.

We seek to teach the Word of God in such a way that its message can be applied to an individual's life, leading that person to greater maturity in Christ.

We reject: (1) The belief that true Christians can be demon possessed; (2) "5-point Calvinism" (i.e., a fatalistic Calvinistic view that leaves no room for free will; specifically, we reject the belief that Jesus' atonement was limited, instead we believe that He died for all people, and we reject the assertion that God's wooing grace cannot be resisted or that He has elected some people to go to hell; instead we believe that anyone who wills to come to Christ may do so); (3) "positive confession" (the faith movement belief that God can be commanded to heal or work miracles according to man's will), (4) human prophecy that supersedes the Scripture, (5) the incorporation of humanistic and secular psychology and philosophy into Biblical teaching, and (6) the over-emphasis of spiritual gifts, experiential signs and wonders to the exclusion of Biblical teaching.

In our services, we focus on a personal relationship with God through worship, prayer, and the teaching of the Word of God. We teach both expository and topically. We do not allow speaking in tongues loudly during services or prophecy while a Bible study is in progress because we do not believe that the Holy Spirit would interrupt Himself. We have specific "after-glow services" and believer's meetings when these gifts of the Spirit may be exercised.

CONCLUSION

By clarifying some of what we believe at Calvary Chapel, our purpose has been simply to help others less familiar with the movement gain insight into who we are. It has not been our intention to say that we are right and everyone else is wrong, nor has it been our intention to argue our position with any Christian believer. We are content to agree to disagree, and we desire to have nothing but love and fellowship with anyone who calls on the name of our Lord in truth and sincerity.

While there are many additional areas of polity and doctrine we could discuss, and while we could write volumes in an effort to defend all our positions against other

positions, this is not our desire. Our desire is to simply adore Jesus, and we invite all God's people to join us as we do so.

On the other hand, there have been people who have started churches and called them Calvary Chapel that hold views and practices very different from what has been described here. In our opinion, it would be better if they would take a different name for their churches that more accurately reflects what they believe and practice so as not to confuse people who are looking for a ministry that is in line with what we have described on the preceding pages.

While many different kinds of people attend and pastor Calvary Chapel affiliated churches, all of the Calvary Chapel leadership (men such as Raul Ries, Greg Laurie, Mike MacIntosh, Jeff Johnson, Don McClure, Steve Mays, and Ken Graves) agree on the essential elements of this statement, although their individual styles of ministry, methods of preaching, and visions for outreach vary greatly.

We seek the unity of the Spirit in a bond of peace and love and believe that God has called us to a unique ministry that fulfills His special purpose in this generation. May God bless you as you seek to draw near to Him in love.