

Chapter 4

The Cradle of New Calvinism

New Calvinism is approximately forty-one years old. Whether New Calvinists of our day want to own the fact or not, they have a contemporary beginning. Though they claim their theology dates back to the Reformers, this seems odd coming from “*New Calvinism*,” but one must remember that we live in a postmodern age where words don’t necessarily mean things. Also different is the fact that there was a day when anything labeled “new” would be rejected out of hand by God’s people. Obviously, those days are long ago if we are now comfortable with doctrines labeled “Christian Hedonism.”

New Calvinists pontificate often regarding their supposed relationship to Jonathan Edwards and others, but are far less anxious to discuss New Calvinism’s connection to Robert Brinsmead, a Seventh-Day Adventist who many say has now denied Christianity all together. In fact, though his name does not arise often, when it does, things can get testy. Chad Bresson, a Christian radio personality and *New Covenant Theology* buff, recently posted an excerpt written by Brinsmead that created a spirited exchange with readers on his *Vossed World* blog.⁹ A reader who had never even heard of Robert Brinsmead apparently worded a comment in a way that invoked Bresson’s sensitivities regarding the Brinsmead issue. He responded accordingly:

....the ad hominem isn't helpful, nor is it accurate. I would quote something from the pope if I thought it would be helpful conveying a thought here....There are two reasons your analogy doesn't wash: 1. Brinsmead wrote this ditty during a time of his life (as SDA, no less) when he affirmed reformed theology. That this guy is now an atheist is irrelevant.

2. What Brinsmead says here isn't anything different than what has been posted on this blog for the past three years. In fact, given the recent articles written by the guys at Southern, what Brinsmead writes here could have just as easily have been written by one of them.

So why would Bresson risk such an exchange by using a Brinsmead excerpt? Because the excerpt articulated the basis of how New Calvinists approach Scripture in a way that many others can't—due to the fact that Robert Brinsmead laid the primary foundation that supports New Calvinism. The fact that Bresson, who is on the cutting edge of New Calvinism, quoted Brinsmead is not happenstance. That foundation brings us back to our theme: reductionism.

Before we focus on the reductionist doctrine that gave life to New Calvinism, Brinsmead's storied life should be touched on. The following information comes from an organization called "Pilgrims Rest" located in Beersheba Springs, Tennessee. It is a Seventh-Day Adventist (hereafter: SDA) apologist group. The following can be observed on their website sdadefend.com :

In the 1940s, there was a family living up in a mountain range in the northern part of Queensland, Australia. The father and mother in the home had been blessed with high caliber intelligence and a studious devotion to the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy. In the course of their earlier research, they had even checked out the German Reform Church (which calls itself the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement), and, after discovering its errors, they had returned to the Adventist Church and a deeper study of God's Word....

Although they lived in a rural area, several other Adventists came to study the books with them once each week.

Gradually the study group grew larger, until many families were journeying weekly to their meetings some from over a hundred miles away. The name of the family was Brinsmead....

In the early 1950s, their son, Robert, decided to go to Avondale College. He had inherited the brilliance of his parents and, upon arrival at our college in Australia, soon became the center of a student study group. Bob was filled with information which his parents had researched out, and he shared these concepts with others. Eventually, he became reader to one of the leading Bible teachers at the school. ("Reader" means he graded student papers for that teacher.)....

Then came the year 1960. The Brinsmeads combined brilliance of mind, a knowledge of the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy, and Australian push. Young Robert had inherited all that, but had he also inherited the solid grounding in the Word which his parents had, or did he merely receive an education in it? Many still wonder about that.

Robert had been traveling in Australia and preaching his parents' message. Meanwhile, a young man in eastern Oregon heard of him and the two corresponded. Al Hudson had a little printing company in Baker, Oregon. He urged young Brinsmead (about 26 at the time) to come to America and present his message. He did just that. It was 1960 and a Catholic was running for president of the United States. Our people were upset, and wondered what was coming next.

Arriving at the Portland, Oregon, airport, Robert was met by a friend of mine who drove him to his home. That night, that friend tried to show Bob a key error in his teaching, but to no avail. Bob Brinsmead was never a man to back down. He had a bulldog pugnacity, which fascinated people and helped produce his large following. Humility was not part of it. Shortly thereafter, Brinsmead arrived at Walla Walla College. Leadership in America was totally unwarned and unprepared. They did not know he was in the country. Many people attended the meetings, and listened as he spoke several nights in a building off campus. By the time leadership awoke, it was too late. Key Spirit of Prophecy truths had been imparted. Talk about a crisis: Walla Walla College had one right then.¹⁰

Whatever *Spirit of Prophecy* teachings are that his parents were propagating aside, the point here is to note Brinsmead's uncanny ability to persuade—even at his young age:

Heading south, Brinsmead went to Loma Linda, and there met wealthy backers. As long as he stayed with theology, his future was assured.

While there, Bob eliminated the Mentone, California, German Reform Church (the official name is the Adventist Reform Movement). Their own denominational leaders had been taken unawares also, and young Brinsmead had the opportunity to speak with most of the Reform Movement members in that area at a series of meetings. Because of his parents' experience, young Brinsmead knew exactly how to pinpoint the German Reform errors, and reply to them from the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy. The entire Mentone church disbanded and rejoined the Adventist Church....

Brinsmead would not do that again. Throughout North America, German Reform leaders held emergency meetings with their followers and told them they must not attend Brinsmead's meetings, while refusing to say why they should not do so. The sheep obeyed the shepherds they had chosen. In the main body, our denominational leaders were doing the same thing. Upon inquiry, they would say, "Brinsmead's teaching contains dangerous error." 'What is it?' "It is so dangerous, I cannot tell you." ^{Id}

The following excerpts lead us to the next step in understanding how the foundation of New Calvinism came about:

In 1965, I met one of Brinsmead's top financial supporters. He told me he would do anything Brinsmead told him to do; give any amount of money, go to any distant country, anything. Folk with that type of mentality went with Brinsmead all the way; first, into his 1970 heresy, and, later, into his 1980 heresy. Those in the other category remained with the Spirit of Prophecy and grieved as they saw their friends led away from God's Word.^{Id}

Those years, 1970, and 1980, are worthy of notation, but we are primarily interested in 1970. Prior to 1970 while in America, and not mentioned in the article cited thus far, Brinsmead had started an Adventist subculture known as the "Awakening movement." They were also known as "Awakeners." During that time (1961-1984¹¹), Brinsmead developed three major theological frames. The first had to do with a Protestant view of justification by faith alone in order to stand at the judgment clothed in the righteousness of Christ instead of our own. That was *very good news* to the Adventist crowd. The first frame came about because of the following influence:

Brinsmead was busily making friends with Protestant pastors and leaders in Australia, so he could hold public forums with them. In Brisbane one day, he stopped off at a theological school, intending to do some research in its library. But he also wanted to meet the headmaster, Geoffrey Paxton, who was influential among the ministers in that city.

Paxton was a highly-educated Anglican minister, with as much self-confidence and assertiveness as Brinsmead. An hour of intended discussion turned into days, and Paxton gradually converted Brinsmead to Anglicanism....

Immediately, Brinsmead set to work to defend his new position. With Paxton's help, he tried to imaginatively expand on definitions of justification. And he devised theories to downplay the importance of sanctification. By the time of his 1971 meeting tour of North America, he was proclaiming that we are saved solely by justification. Period.¹²

That information coincides with an article written by Martin L. Carey who grew up in the Awakening movement. Carey states the following:

The resulting abundance of literature and tapes galvanized our movement's mission and kept it moving. Additionally, Bob Brinsmead was constantly adjusting his message. Whenever Awakeners would meet they would ask one another, "Have you heard the latest?" We always looked for the next church-shaking new emphasis. Brinsmead had a genius for building elaborate theological structures, getting everyone excited, and then tearing them down for a "new framework."

He often said, “Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, I keep moving my tent in faith.” There was no resting for the devoted Awakener following Brinsmead’s mercurial leading....

In 1971, Brinsmead scheduled a flurry of summer institutes to bring us his latest emphasis. There was more excitement than usual; the latest round of tapes had prepared us for something big. Bob had been studying the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, comparing it to Roman Catholic doctrines. Reading Luther, he saw that justification is not just a means to the end of perfect sanctification. When we are justified by faith, not only does God impute Christ’s righteousness to us but we also possess Christ Himself—all His righteousness and all His perfection. Eternity flows from that fact.¹³

Brinsmead’s third frame occurred in 1984, and resulted in his departure from the Awakening movement,¹⁴ but the second frame that occurred in 1971 initiated a project that Brinsmead and Paxton started called the *Australian Forum*. The theological journal of the Forum was named *Present Truth Magazine* (later renamed: *Verdict*), and according to Jon Zens, the father of *New Covenant Theology*, the magazine was the “largest English-speaking theological journal in the world at that time.”¹⁴ Zens also notes 1984 as the year that Brinsmead started “going downhill.”¹⁴ Carey explains the second frame doctrine this way:

And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified’ (Rom. 8:30).

The same ones he justified he also glorified. We began to realize we had inserted extra steps into Paul’s chain of salvation:

sanctification and a final atonement brought about by blotting out sins. Those added steps, in fact, were the heart of the Awakening message—but we had ignored the heart of the real gospel: being justified by faith, we ‘rejoice in hope of the glory of God.’ Our righteousness is in heaven, said Brinsmead:

The righteousness by which we become just in God’s sight, remain just in His sight and will one day be sealed as forever just in His sight, is an outside righteousness. It is not on earth, but only in heaven...only in Jesus Christ.”

True sanctification looks away from self and flows from the finished, objective work of Christ.... For many Christians, the glory of the crucified Christ is not their focus; instead they seek internal experiences that eclipse the cross. The Awakening rightly opposed the subjective, human-centered emphasis found among some groups within Christianity. Wrongly, they reacted with a cerebral, spiritless gospel. Brinsmead strongly opposed the Charismatic movement’s emphasis on experiences as a return to the theology of Rome. However, going to another extreme, Present Truth magazine decried “the false gospel of the new birth,” and offered a new birth that was merely a corporate, objective blessing, not an individual experience.¹⁵

In Carey’s preceding description, we have the *magna opus* of New Calvinism, the very core of this reductionist theology. The Australian Forum project then went to work to reconcile the frame with other theological systems; specifically, interpretation of the Bible, Covenant theology, and eschatology. This was the stated goal of the Forum.¹⁶ Their grand thesis was the supposed fact that the Forum was called on to systematize the *objective gospel* in order to complete the Reformation started by Luther and Calvin :

Perhaps this is one reason why the church has unconsciously pushed the Reformation doctrine into the background. If it is allowed to stand in the forefront, it is too revolutionary and might upset the status quo. Following a seminar on justification conducted by the Australian Forum, one of the leaders of a certain religious institution was heard saying, "What we have heard is very good: but how are we going to fit it in with our system?" T. F. Torrance is right when he says, "There is scarcely a Church that claims to be *ecclesia reformata* that can truthfully claim to be *semper reformanda*."

Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda is a confession that the Reformation was not completed with Luther and Calvin. The sanctuary of truth must yet be cleansed from all the errors that were smuggled in under the cover of the Dark Ages. We have no reason to suppose the restoration was completed by the Reformers.¹⁷

Furthermore, the Forum clearly recognized that they were propagating a reductionist theology and saw that as the very heart of the Reformation:

Luther has been called the greatest reductionist in the history of the church. He cut through the complicated maze of medieval theology and reduced all theology to the principle of *sola fide*. The Christian church today is inundated with isms of every stripe and hue. We could spend forever and aye fighting the tentacles of error, but we need to get to the heart. All error is united in its common opposition to the principle of justification by faith. All error obscures the bright light of the gospel.

What the church and the world desperately need is the truth of justification by faith without the encumbrance of the popular errors which have obscured it. We must be courageous enough to let the truth of justification by Christ alone call them all into radical question.¹⁸

Many elements of New Calvinism are merely attempts to reconcile its reductionism with Scripture; as stated before, complicated formulas that attempt to fit a square peg in a round hole. Addressing those issues will not clarify the heart of the problem which is reducing the Christian's role in God's spiritual work to the lowest possible denominator. This is not in proportion to God's truth and calling.

Looking Back

Was the Forum's primary core doctrine (the *centrality of the objective gospel*) original with Robert Brinsmead? The Forum certainly thought it was for they stated the following: "The want of a theology which has a historical, covenantal and eschatological framework is the real issue behind the issues in the current justification-by-faith debate."¹⁹ Why would justification by faith alone need such a system? Because the orthodox view of justification was not that of the Forum:

The Present, Continuous Nature of Justification. For all its strength, Reformed theology tends to relegate justification by faith to an initiatory action in the soteriological process. This is because it contends that the subjective (personal) justification of the believing sinner is a once-and-for-all, nonrepeatable act. Hence the relationship between justification and sanctification is seen as justification succeeded by sanctification.²⁰

One can understand why a theological system would be needed to sell that. A monergistic justification being continuous is not exactly orthodox, but yet, the Forum claimed that it was the true message of the Reformation. And in their minds, no such system existed at that time and I think many would concur. Furthermore, even though the Forum's system included ideas from past theologians, Brinsmead saw the Forum's "package" as something new and unique:

I didn't really say anything that was original - I gathered up jewels that others here and there had mined, and just put it together in a way that seemed clear and important to me. If I could, it would be easier to reply that I had copied the package from somewhere in particular, but I am not able to do that. What I was on about impacted others and sharpened others up-like Paxton and Goldsworthy-and Jons [Jon Zens] and a guy called Edward Fudge and others along the way.²¹
(Also see quote at the top of page 94)

One of the "jewels" Brinsmead undoubtedly harvested was a *historicism* view of Bible interpretation from Geerhardus Vos who was mentioned in chapter three. Graeme Goldsworthy, one of the three major figures involved in the Forum would have been invaluable in developing a hermeneutic that would bring about justification being seen in every verse of the Bible. For now, suffice to say that it is a reductionist view of Scripture known as *Redemptive-Historical hermeneutics*. As the name suggests, it *reduces* the Bible to a historical document that observes redemption only, but in doing that, a complex system is needed to make it work; and Vos' hermeneutic is extremely abstruse accordingly.

In looking back one searches in vain to find unique features of the Forum's doctrine in the Reformed tradition that they claimed to be upholding. Especially the denial of the *new birth*. Geoffrey Paxton wrote an article for the Forum entitled, "The False Gospel of the New Birth."²²

Remember, the reductionist doctrine we are dealing with focuses completely on the *gospel outside of us*. Supposedly, all spiritual growth flows from a focus on our original salvation and an ever deeper appreciation of it. Remember also: the goal of reductionist theology is to **reduce** man's role in God's spiritual work to the least common denominator. Therefore, this necessitates a position on the *new birth* part of salvation (the progressive growing part after we are justified) ***because the new birth increases man's role in the salvation process through enablement***. Hence, it must be neutralized because it focuses on man (even though God is the enabler).

How did the Forum do that? They acknowledged the new birth as truth, but said it was subjective as opposed to objective, and only the gospel (justification, or salvation) was objective. The growing part of salvation (sanctification) was the "fruit" and not the "root." It is a "good" thing, but not the "best" thing. Therefore, the focus needs to be on the root; or, our original salvation/works of Christ, *not anything we do*, or the results/fruit. The approach to the works of Christ that originally saved us needs to be active, but the approach to the results, or the fruit, needs to be passive. In other words, the **results** (fruit) ***are not to be applied in an attempt to grow spiritually***—that's making the fruit the root. One way of stating this is: to make the *subjective* result of the *objective* gospel a duty to perform is to **reverse justification and sanctification**. Therefore, all of the commands in the Bible (which are normally thought to be under the auspices of sanctification) are **not** to be applied to life in an attempt to participate in change/spiritual growth, but are rather to be observed as the natural result of a *deeper understanding* of the works of Christ that saved us.

Obedience to commands are acknowledged as a necessity because salvation always has a result, but putting obedience first as a duty, and not a result, supposedly reverses justification and sanctification, and because *justification is ongoing*, putting duty first effectively replaces justification with sanctification which in the case of this model would be salvation by works due to the interference of justification with sanctification.

This is why, as mentioned in chapter three, that Paul Tripp has written that biblical commands must be seen in their “gospel context.”

In other words, the *centrality of the objective gospel* interprets everything through justification. The Forum described it this way:

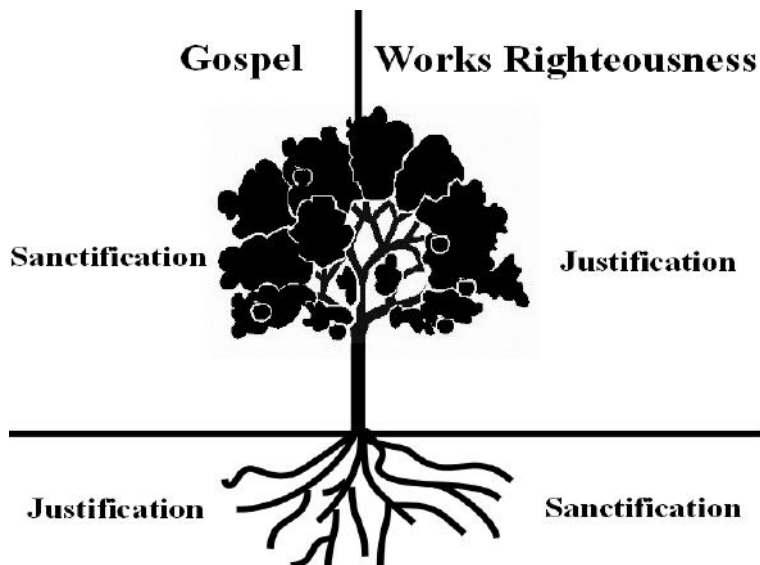
We are not saying that the typical evangelical approach to the new birth is an outright denial of the truth. Rather, it is the corruption of the ultimate truth. It confuses a good effect with the best cause. It puts a good fruit in place of the best root. Many who do this are good people whose Christian status and integrity we do not question. But that is the alarming thing about the new birth craze.^{1d}

Don’t be confused, we will revisit all of this in the “Doctrine” section. For now, understand that like the Forum’s *centrality of the objective gospel*, New Calvinism makes duties attributed to our role in the growth process of Christianity the fruit of the source completely outside of us—Christ and His historic work of redemption. When we internalize those works, even those works attributed to the Spirit, it precariously increases man’s role in the salvation process which is contra to the goal of reductionism. The purpose of discussing this now is to establish the kinship between The Australian Forum and New Calvinism which is an important aspect of their contemporary history.

Looking Forward

While one struggles to find the unique Forum “package” looking back, such is not the case looking forward, starting with their unique way of denying the new birth. The new birth is true, but if you make it equal with the gospel, it becomes a false gospel. The new birth is the fruit, not the root. Sanctification is either the fruit or the root, and justification is either the fruit or root,

but if sanctification is the root and justification is the fruit—that’s works salvation. In the following illustration, keep in mind that this is not the orthodox evangelical model that wouldn’t include the finished works of justification. Such a model would illustrate the believer and Holy Spirit working together in the believer being “set apart” (the very definition of sanctification is to be *set apart*) for God’s glory. The Forum/New Calvinist model imposes a false presupposition that everything must be interpreted through the prism of justification:



The Forum as well as contemporary New Calvinists refer to this as “reversing justification and sanctification.” We have an excellent example of this looking forward. In March, 2008, Graeme Goldsworthy of the Forum delivered a lecture at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary entitled *Biblical Theology and its Pastoral Application*. Part of the thesis concerned why the Reformation was needed. The purpose of Goldsworthy’s lecture was affirmed by pastor John Piper in an article he wrote on his *Desiring God* blog on June 25, 2009 entitled *Goldsworthy on Why the Reformation Was Necessary*.²³ The lecture, and Piper’s response shows an uncanny kinship between the Forum and New Calvinism. Examples in the present Christian landscape are myriad, but this particular combination shows agreement on all of the Forum’s major, and unique tenets.

Piper is known by some as the “elder statesman of New Calvinism,” and one wonders why an independent Calvinistic Baptist from Minnesota took note of a lecture by an obscure Anglican priest at a Southern Baptist seminary. One also wonders how an obscure Anglican priest from Australia ended up lecturing at a Southern Baptist seminary located in Kentucky. But the fact of the matter is that Goldsworthy’s “Trilogy” is a large volume that is the standard for interpretation among New Calvinists. It is based on Vos’ *Biblical Theology* interpretive model (strictly from a historical perspective) which is also part of Goldsworthy’s lecture title that he delivered at Southern. Therefore, in Bresson’s previously mentioned spat with a reader over Robert Brinsmead’s interpretive model, it is not surprising that Bresson noted that the same things are being taught at Southern if former ghosts of the Forum are lecturing there.

In the aforementioned article concerning Goldsworthy’s lecture at Southern, Piper agrees that the original Reformation sought to correct the reversal of sanctification and justification:

This meant the reversal of the relationship of sanctification to justification. Infused grace, beginning with baptismal regeneration, internalized the Gospel and made sanctification the basis of justification. This is an upside down Gospel.

In case one would think that Piper excludes evangelicals from this concern because of his mention of baptismal regeneration, consider what he said in the same article: “I would add that this ‘upside down’ gospel has not gone away— neither from Catholicism nor from Protestants....” The previous illustration (tree pictorial) shows what Piper is talking about visually. The same illustration lends itself to Piper’s reference regarding an “upside down Gospel,” simply turn the tree upside down matching the root with sanctification and the fruit with justification. In the same article, Piper bemoans that such a reversal puts our souls in peril. Why? Because if justification is the fruit (ie., goal)—that’s works salvation.

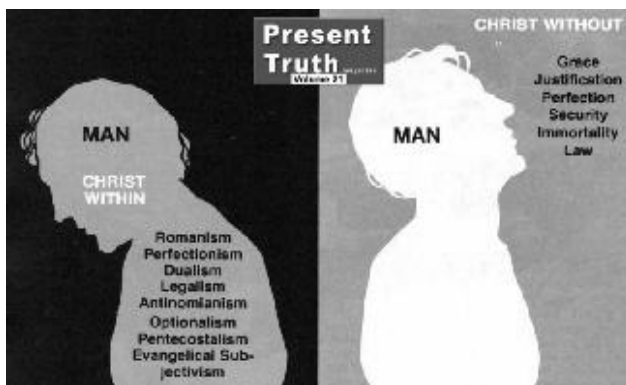
To the contrary, Christians don't seek *justification* as our goal, but rather to please our king in being set apart (2Corinthians 5:9).

Piper concurs with Goldsworthy that “infused grace” is the problem. The like complaint is that the *completely outside of us gospel* empowers us inwardly, subjects us to subjective distractions from the power of the *historic Christ event*, and makes the natural result of the gospel our power source (the fruit), instead of the outward power of the gospel, the real root. To *infuse grace* is to suggest that we are ***enabled to participate in being justified by our own efforts in bringing about the natural results of the gospel.*** Sometimes, New Calvinists refer to this as “fruit stapling.” Our work is limited to (the least common denominator) of learning more and more about the historic Christ event (gospel/justification) and then merely letting our obedience flow from a deeper understanding of the gospel. This will be revisited later in more detail.

Nothing shows this kinship between the Forum and New Calvinism more than a Piper quote from this same article and a visual aid used by Robert Brinsmead to demonstrate how “infused grace” supposedly puts our souls in peril. First Piper’s quote:

When the ground of justification moves from Christ *outside of us* to the work of Christ *inside of us*, the gospel (and the human soul) is imperiled. It is an upside down gospel [emphasis Piper’s—not this author].

Now observe Brinsmead’s illustration on the next page:



Like the Forum, Piper has a problem with making the new birth part of the gospel for purposes previously stated and apes their position that it reverses justification and sanctification while turning the gospel “upside down.” In fact, the Forum entitled a whole issue of *Present Truth* (volume 15) exactly that: “The Upside-Down Gospel.” Piper concurs with them exactly on the *centrality of the objective gospel* and even uses their phraseology.²⁴

Piper also shows further kinship to the Forum in regard to lumping evangelicalism together with Roman Catholicism:

In it [Goldsworthy’s lecture at Southern] it gave one of the clearest statements of why the Reformation was needed and what the problem was in the way the Roman Catholic church had conceived of the gospel....I would add that this ‘upside down’ gospel has not gone away—neither from Catholicism nor from Protestants.

It should be easy to make the case for that connection between Piper and the Forum by observing Brinsmead’s illustration on the “Christ Within” side of the picture. The Forum had deep animosity towards evangelicalism and *Present Truth* was saturation with criticism of evangelicals accordingly. This is where present-day New Calvinism gets its animosity towards evangelicalism—from the Forum because they both think that evangelicals propagate the false gospel of Rome.

What makes it false? Fruit stapling. You may be asking yourself: “What about all of the imperatives in the Bible?” Their like theology, no, *exact* theology that addresses that will be covered under the “Doctrine” section of this book.

Piper continues in his evaluation:

Both Catholicism and allegorical interpretation of Scripture involved the dehistoricizing of the Gospel. The Reformation rehistoricized both the Gospel and the Old Testament.

This according to Goldsworthy with Piper in agreement. The historicizing of the Bible is critical for Forum/New Calvinism doctrine. It makes the Bible fit with the *centrality of the objective gospel*. The Bible becomes a *gospel narrative* or historical account of Christ’s redemptive work—period. The imperatives of the Bible are the parts of the narrative that show us our weaknesses and what Christ has done for us, invoking a gratitude that results in willing obedience flowing from justification. Instruction is only applicable for structural concerns such as church polity, etc. New Calvinists are stellar in regard to preaching sermons that display the greatness of Christ, but will show lack in practical application on how we live kingdom life—that’s living by lists and fruit stapling. Hence, Goldsworthy wrote elsewhere,

The gospel is no timeless ideal or myth-based ethical principle. The Old Testament unrelentingly binds us to the acts of God in history.... To neglect the Old Testament exposes us to the danger of turning the objective Christ event into the subjective Christ ideal.²⁵

So, “ideals” and “ethics” are “subjective,” but a strict history regarding the “Christ event” is “objective.” Piper furthers the point by stating the following in the same review:

The prime focus recovered in the Reformation was the justification of the sinner on the basis of the objective, historic work of Christ *for us*.

In this quote by Piper we see yet another tenet of Forum doctrine; the Bible is an account of all the different types of works Christ accomplished for us; ie., works that we would normally do in sanctification. This idea is wrapped up in the often heard jingle by New Calvinists, “*Christ for us*.” This would be one of the “jewels” Brinsmead spoke of that was borrowed from earlier Reformed thought often referred to as *double imputation*. It teaches that not only was righteousness imputed to us in the atonement, but obedience was imputed to us as well. Christ not only came to pay the penalty of sin for us, he also came to live a perfect life so that obedience would be imputed to us as well. Therefore, all of the commands in the Bible supposedly demonstrate how Christ accomplished what we are not able to; specifically, keeping the law. On this same point, another New Calvinist teaches that the law is meant to drive the Christian to “despair of self righteousness” which results in fleeing back to the cross and the root of our justification.²⁶ Piper said the following in a sermon that further explains how one is to view the law in Scripture:

Read it and meditate on it as those who are dead to it as the ground of your justification and the power of your sanctification. Read it and meditate on it as those for whom Christ is your righteousness and Christ is your sanctification. Which means read and mediate on it to know Christ better and to treasure him more. Christ and the Father are one (John 10:30; 14:9). So to know the God of the Old Testament is to know Christ. The more you see his glory and treasure his worth, the more you will be changed into his likeness (2 Corinthians 3:17-18), and love the way he loved – which is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10).

I say it again. What shall you do with the law – you who are justified by faith alone apart from works of the law? Read it and meditate on it to know more deeply than you have ever known, the justice and mercy of God in Christ, your righteousness and your life.²⁷

Conspicuously missing is a suggestion that we obey it. Like many New Calvinists, Piper misses the fact that myriads adore Christ—they just don’t respect Him enough to do what He says (Luke 11: 27,28). More detail will be given later to this whole *Christocentric/Redemptive-Historical* approach to Scripture, but before we leave for the next point, let me mention that the point of contention between Bresson and the aforementioned visitor to his blog was the following description of *Redemptive-Historical* hermeneutics by Robert Brinsmead:

This means that unless we are caught up in the Spirit of the gospel, we cannot understand or use the Bible correctly. Apart from the gospel the Bible is letter (*gramma*), not Spirit (*pneuma*). “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”²⁸

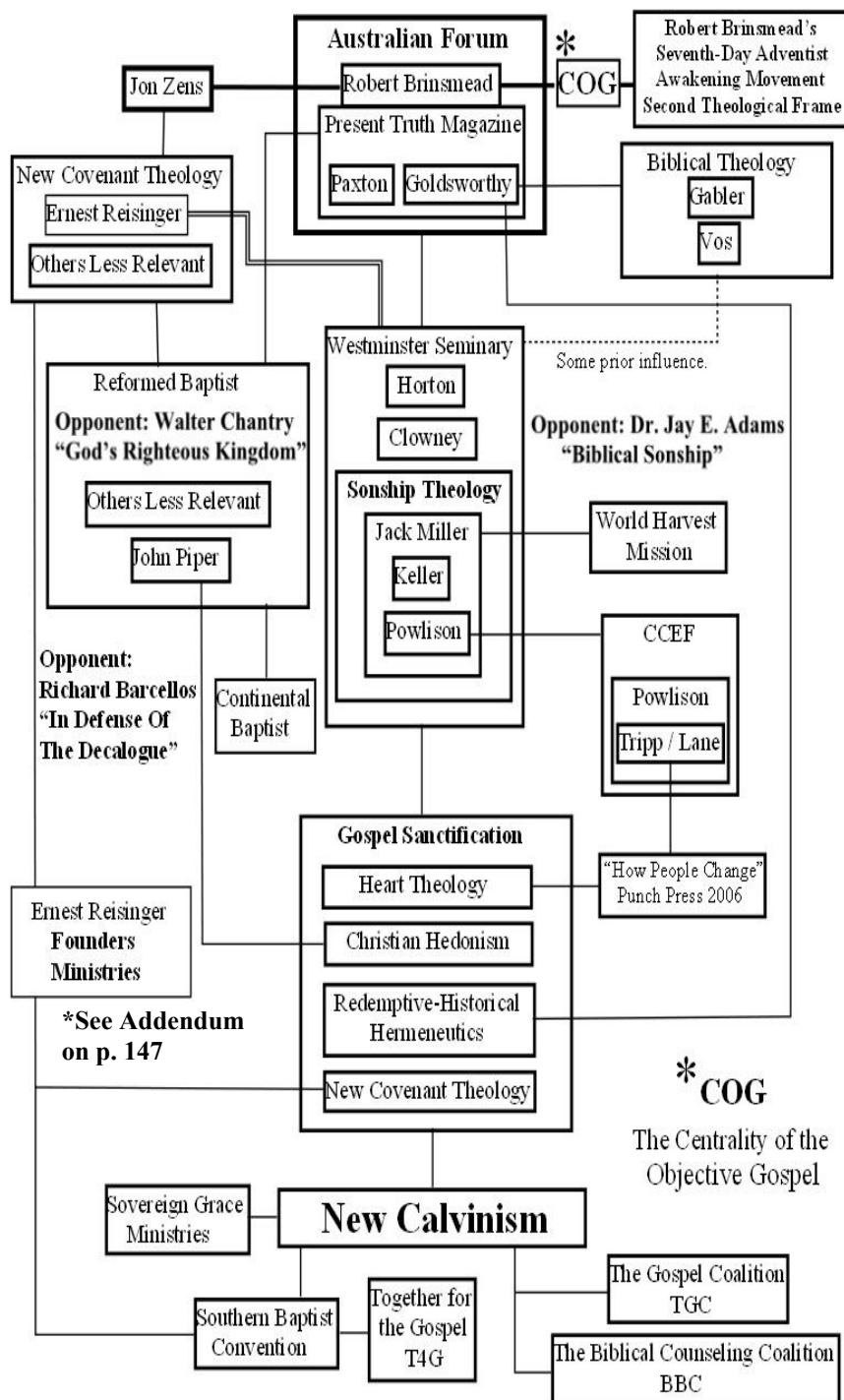
In other words, the Spirit illumines the Word for the sole purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of the gospel. Only the gospel is objective—all other uses of the Bible are subjective and not illumined by the Spirit.

The following statement by Goldsworthy apart from the lecture being discussed should summarize what is being written here, especially in regard to our visual *tree illustration*:

One is unlikely to assert that we are justified by sanctification, but, whether done intentionally or not, that is what happens when we allow the teaching of Christian living, ethical imperatives, and exhortations to holiness to be separated from and to take the place of the clear statement of the gospel.²⁹

Looking back before 1970, where is the *centrality of the objective gospel*? Looking forward—it's everywhere. What many among the New Calvinist crowd missed is the SDA influence in this newest reductionist model. Fundamental to SDA theology is the *investigative judgment*. SDA theology is heavily focused on being able to stand in the judgment. This is probably why the *centrality of the objective gospel* has justification moving forward; in fact, right up to the judgment. But evangelicals are not focused on being fit for the judgment. We have already been declared righteous—we rather look for our reward (1Corinthians 3:8).

Sure, many elements and “jewels” harvested by the Forum extend many years beforehand, but the way the Forum packaged those jewels along with their own understanding of theology is what has launched New Calvinism to where it is today. Robert Brinsmead is the father of New Calvinism.



New Covenant Theology. This morning we will look at a text and suggest that this idea under this label is exactly how the apostle Paul read and interpreted Scripture.

As a ministry that vigorously supports all the major tenets of New Calvinism such as Heart Theology, Redemptive Historical Hermeneutics, and Christian Hedonism, one of their pastors on staff, former radio personality Chad Bresson, is sometimes referred to as “the golden boy of central Ohio NCT.” On the one hand, he is also a member of the Earth Stove Society formed to promote NCT. On the other hand, he has a blog dedicated to the “Biblical Theology” of Geerhardus Vos, the father of Chrsitocentric Hermeneutics. He often posts articles by two former key figures of the Australian Forum on that same blog: Robert Brinsmead and Graeme Goldsworthy.

The Plot to Take Over the SBC With COG

The plot to take over the SBC with the Forum doctrine was hatched in a hotel room in Euless, Texas on November 13, 1982:

Then, on November 13, 1982, [Ernest] Reisinger, Nettles and Malone met at a Holiday Inn in Euless, Texas, for prayer to seek God’s direction with respect to a Southern Baptist conference ministry. Nettles brought to the meeting several young men who had embraced the doctrines of grace. Among them were Bill and Tom Ascol, Ben Mitchell and evangelist R.F. Gates. Reisinger later called this one of the most meaningful prayer meetings in which he had ever participated. The attendees spent the first half of the day in prayer, reading Psalms and hymns. During the second half of the day, they discussed ideas. They finally settled on the idea of a conference with the doctrines of grace as its

foundation. Thus began the Southern Baptist Founders Conference (*Founders Ministries* blog: *The Beginnings of Reformation in The Southern Baptist Convention: The Rise of the Founders Movement*).

Reisinger was a former Presbyterian turned Reformed Baptist, then Southern Baptist. He also knew Cornelius Van Til personally. Van Til, a Reformed Presbyterian with an inclination towards mysticism like his close friend Geerhardus Vos, attended Reisinger's ordination in 1971. As far as the movement begun by Reisinger and others to restore the "doctrines of grace" to the SBC, another Presbyterian by the name of John H. Armstrong was apparently present at its conception and describes the movement as the beginnings of the "neo-Calvinism" movement in a review of *Time* magazine's 2009 assessment of the New Calvinism movement:

I have watched this movement for neo-Calvinism from its infancy. I personally attended the first meeting (and several more the years following) of the group that started this effort back in the 1980s. I personally knew the founder who dreamed up the idea of recovering Calvinism in the SBC [Ernie Reisinger] and then spread the "doctrines of grace" very widely. He is now with the Lord [ie., five years prior in 2004]....I was also involved in the various "gospel" recovery groups which were begun, now creating large gatherings of folk who believe they are the people who are preaching and recovering the "biblical gospel" (*John H. Armstrong* blog: *The New Calvinism*, Archives; March 31, 2009).

The early eighties is when the combination of the *Forum*, their theological journal, and the push among Reformed Baptists by Jon Zens (with the help of Robert Brinsmead) began to rapidly expand. And the torch carried forth was the idea that the

Forum had recovered the lost doctrines of grace. Armstrong makes that clear:

The sixteenth-century rediscovery of Paul's objective message of justification by faith [and sanctification also because justification is supposedly progressive] came upon the religious scene of that time with a force and passion that totally altered the course of human history. It ignited the greatest reformation and revival known since Pentecost.

Now, if the Fathers of the early church, so nearly removed in time from Paul, lost touch with the Pauline message, how much more is this true in succeeding generations? The powerful truth of righteousness by faith needs to be restated plainly, and understood clearly, by every new generation.

In our time we are awash in a "Sea of Subjectivism," as one magazine put it over twenty years ago. Let me explain. In 1972 a publication known as *Present Truth* published the results of a survey with a five-point questionnaire which dealt with the most basic issues between the medieval church and the Reformation. Polling showed 95 per cent of the "Jesus People" were decidedly medieval and anti-Reformation in their doctrinal thinking about the gospel. Among church-going Protestants they found ratings nearly as high.

Reading Scott Hahn's testimony in his book, *Rome Sweet Home* (Ignatius Press, 1993), I discovered the same misunderstanding. Here can be found a complete and total failure to perceive the truths of grace, faith and the righteousness of God. No wonder Hahn left his Presbyterian

Church of America ordination behind to become a Roman Catholic. He did not understand the gospel in the first place, as his own words demonstrate.

I do not believe that the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith can be overstated. We are once again in desperate need of recovery. Darkness has descended upon the evangelical world in North America and beyond, much as it had upon the established sixteenth-century church (*The Highway* blog: Article of the Month, *Sola Fide: Does It Really Matter?*; Dr. John H. Armstrong).

According to Armstrong: “We are **once again** in desperate need of **recovery**. Darkness has descended upon the evangelical world in North America and beyond, much as it had upon the **established sixteenth-century church**.” Apparently, light came “twenty years” prior to his writing of that post via the Forum’s *Present Truth* magazine. That was the mindset of the “Reformation” movement in the early eighties that is now New Calvinism. The details of this are expanded in chapter four of this book.

A Proven Method

Reisinger was no stranger to how the formation of conferences could affect the taking over of Christian groups. He witnessed firsthand how this was done by Jon Zens in 1979:

At the fall Banner of Truth Conference in 1979, Ron McKinney spoke with Iain Murray, Ernie Reisinger and others about the possibility of having a conference where some aspects of Reformed theology could be discussed and evaluated by men of differing viewpoints (Jon Zens: *Law And Ministry In The Church: An Informal Essay On Some Historical Developments*, 72-84).

That conference ended up being the first “1980 Council on Baptist Theology” held in Plano, TX. It was the coming out party for New Covenant Theology, and eventually resulted in the formation of a denomination that split a large group of Reformed Baptists. Two years later, Reisinger would be leading the way for the same kind of “revival.” From the beginning, NCT/COG came forth from the womb with visions of grandeur, splitting churches, deceiving, and wreaking havoc on God’s people. It will continue to do so until it is stopped.

But wasn’t Ernest Reisinger an opponent of NCT and a good friend of Walter Chantry who also opposed NCT? Apparently, Chantry was opposed to certain aspects of Zens’ teachings before it was NCT, especially the antinomian parts. As far as the who’s who of the evangelical world mugging together while differing on theology—what’s new? NCT theology cannot be separated from New Calvinism over one of many disagreements among them concerning how law and gospel relate to each other. Still, they all believe in the fusion of justification and sanctification. Ernest Reisinger stated the following in “Lordship and Regeneration”:

The Lordship teaching puts the order of salvation as follows: 1) Regeneration, 2) Faith (which includes repentance), 3) Justification, 4) Sanctification (distinct from but always joined to justification), and 5) Glorification.

The “always joined” justification and sanctification is the fusion thereof, and the “distinct[ion]” he is talking about is the supposed idea that sanctification is the progressive form of justification. Orthodox evangelicals believe no such thing. Also, his view of the distinctions between law and gospel are endorsed by proponents of Sonship Theology, which will certainly save one research on that wise concerning Reisinger (*Gospel Discipling—The Crying Need of the Hour*: Stephen E. Smallman; Executive Director, World Harvest Mission, November 1997).

Does Chantry believe in the synthesis of justification and sanctification? It's not relevant—the primary point concerning Chantry is that he recognized antinomian elements of NCT early in the movement, and also, his role refutes the story among New Calvinists that this doctrine has always been widely accepted among other Reformed leaders. It might be noted that he didn't launch an attempted takeover of the SBC which makes him less relevant than Reisinger, who also promoted the Founders movement among Southern Baptists by claiming that James Boyce believed in their form of “Calvinism.” Did James Boice believe in the fusion of justification and sanctification? That's doubtful.

Did the COG Come After the Reisinger, or Before the Ascol?

One of the participants in the “prayer meeting”/takeover plot at the Holiday Inn at Euless was Tom Ascol, heir apparent to Reisinger's pastorate and Founders Ministries. Ascol is a consummate New Calvinist. On Grace Baptist Church's website, under “core distinctives,” the following statement appears:

The gospel is not an add-on to our services or merely an entry point to Christianity. The gospel is the message we preach and the means by which we persevere in the faith. We focus on applying the gospel to every area of living, including marriage, family, work, personal sanctification, evangelism, and Christian community.

In 2010, Ascol authored a resolution to the SBC's annual convention entitled, “SBC Resolution on the Centrality of the Gospel.” In part, it reads:

....and be it further

RESOLVED, That we encourage churches in preaching, teaching, and discipleship to proclaim the gospel to unbelievers, showing them how to find peace with God, and to proclaim the gospel to believers, that through the renewing of our

minds we might continually be transformed by the gospel.

Did Ascol embrace New Calvinism after the passing of an orthodox Ernest Reisinger? That's very doubtful. Ascol said the following on Reisinger's homepage:

Ernie Reisinger has been a mentor, friend and great encourager to me in the ministry. I thank the Lord for his influence in my life. [Tom Ascol Pastor of Grace Baptist Church, Cape Coral, Florida, Executive Director of Founders' Ministries and Editor of Founders Journal.] (*The Reformed Reader* blog homepage).

Ascol represents what Reisinger believed from the beginning. Ascol learned it from Reisinger. Armstrong places Reisinger at the beginning of the movement, and as an eyewitness, describes it to a "T." And like all New Calvinists, Reisinger possessed an arrogance that crowned him the supposed savior of the SBC.

The SBC's Dark Future

Unless the hostile takeover of the SBC is halted, Southern Baptists will be removed from history, its service assets compiled by sacred labor plundered, assemblies divided, and replaced with cult-like congregations. The very essence of this movement and its tenets breed cultish assemblies. The following can be read on page 134 of this book:

All this leads to many New Calvinist churches taking on cult-like tendencies. Exclusiveness (new Reformation), an attitude that some higher knowledge is a part of the movement that many are not "ready" for (the scandalous gospel), and a subjective view of Scripture (a gospel narrative, not instruction) is a mixture that will have bad results, and is the perfect formula for a cult-like church.