Today’s Psalm was sung at the dedication of the Temple of David. It is one of the most beautiful and revealing of the psalms and of any Scripture. It speaks of crying out to God for help, and God responds by yanking our souls right out of the pit of hell. And the writer on behalf of God’s people offers praise and thanksgiving. It is very nearly a picture of what our worship ought always to be. The Psalmist reminds us that God’s anger is but for a moment, but his favor is for a lifetime. Is that not a picture of salvation? He goes on to say that weeping may linger for a night, but joy comes with the morning. Is that not a picture of God’s love and relationship to us as we seek to live a life dependent on God? To me, this psalm is very nearly identical to what Jesus said time and again and in so many ways throughout the gospels.

I came close to calling this sermon, “Why I Could Never Be a Calvinist.” As you may know, there has been a raging controversy among Southern Baptists over Calvinism and its inroads into our colleges and seminaries. It has very nearly taken over the religion department at Louisiana College. Although I have pretty much avoided theological topics in my sermons, I feel there is some need to say something. Most Baptists probably know very little about Calvinism and even less of John Calvin. Calvin was the great French Reformer and the “father” of such reformed bodies as the Presbyterians, the Dutch Reformed churches, German Reformed bodies, and various other groups who hold to a system of theology emphasizing the sovereignty of God, the depravity of humans, salvation by Christ but through predestination and election, and grace dispensed by the church through the ordinances or sacraments. Inerrancy of Scripture is also a key doctrine. So, you can see why Calvinism would be a raging controversy among Baptists.

Historically, very few Baptists have held to anything like a true Calvinistic theology or viewpoint. If you grew up in the South, you undoubtedly heard references to “hard shell” Baptists, something of a derogatory term
for Primitive Baptists who are not at all missionary and believe that God has chosen only a few to be saved and that has already been predestined. In the earliest days of Baptists, there were two primary camps of these non-conformists or separatists as they were called in England. Both came out of the Church of England and so are not literally considered Protestant. One group, the Particular Baptists, believed in election and predestination, that is that God saved only “particular” individuals. The other group, the General Baptists, believed in free salvation offered to all. Both groups practiced adult baptism, and the General Baptists practiced evangelism and missions. As the groups came to America, guess which one thrived? So, about all you had left of Calvinistic Baptists in this country were the Primitive Baptists. Virtually all other variants of Baptists followed the free-will pattern, that is, salvation was available to all who would believe. So, there you have it, Calvinism and Baptist history in a nutshell.

I’m not going to spend any more time here on the complications of these beliefs or denigrate those who follow Calvinism, at least outside Baptist circles. What I do know from having worked among Presbyterians for a good chunk of my life is that Calvinism is a dangerous road to travel. It opens up all sorts of things like arrogance, poor treatment of those who don’t hold the line theologically, and possibly even the eventual disappearance of whole denominations who fail to be missionary. The main body of Presbyterians in this country, the PCUSA, has dwindled in membership year by year so that its national membership has dropped below two million. Other groups such as Redeemer who are members of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) who are more evangelical and evangelistic are growing. Surely it comes as no surprise that as more and more Southern Baptist leaders proclaim and practice Calvinism that Southern Baptists, too, have dwindled in membership over the past five years. Theology alone is not the reason. Failure to preach the gospel and win converts to Christ is as much a reason as any for the dwindling membership among Baptists, Methodists, Disciples of Christ and others. But if you believe that salvation has already been predetermined, that most surely puts a damper on efforts to reach the lost for Christ.

But the failure of Baptists to maintain their historic and might I say their real “fundamental” beliefs may be as much a result of our failure to
educate converts as to win them in the first place. Worship and evangelism alone are not enough to create a committed body of discipleship. When Southern Baptists stopped having Training Union, they lost half of their calling. Did not Jesus say that “whosoever believes in me” shall be saved? And does not the New Testament also tell us that “it is not the will of God the Father that any should perish”? Did not Jesus command that his followers go into all the world baptizing and making disciples? Do not the Gospels tell us over and over of what a struggle it was for Jesus to teach his disciples and his followers how to live the gospel? Did not Jesus die for the sins of the whole world? If so, why are some Baptists hanging their faith on one or two references in the letters of Paul that seem to indicate election? Is it possible that when Paul speaks of the “elect of God” that he’s speaking not so much of being elected by God but of the believer’s “electing” or “accepting” of God’s grace? Be a Calvinist if you wish, but I cannot read the New Testament and follow that part of Calvinistic theology!

Well, all that may sound like a far cry from Psalm 30, but let me say this, I remain a Baptist because I believe in salvation through the free acceptance of God’s free grace, the right of us as individual Christians to read and interpret the Bible for ourselves, and the right and responsibility of the local church to determine its own doctrines and policies. I pray God this will always be true of this church. Furthermore, Psalm 30 reminds us of just what discipleship is all about: we recognize that we are sinners, we recognize that God saves us, and because of that we worship our God who has “turned our mourning into dancing and clothed us with joy so that our souls may praise him and not be silent.”

We have these words from the anonymous author in a little book Rules for a New Brother, probably meaning a monk but so very applicable to all of us:

To choose God is to realize that you are known and loved in a way surpassing anything one can imagine, loved before anyone had thought of you or spoken your name.

... And so, don’t talk too much about God but live in the certainty that God has written your name on the palm of his hand.
Live your human task in the liberating certainty that nothing in the world can separate you from God’s love for you.

Now that’s cause for joy in the morning!

There is one belief of Calvin that appeals to me, although I don’t take it literally. In the matter of the Lord’s Supper, Calvin could not understand how Christ could be both in heaven at the right hand of God and literally present in the bread and wine. So he rejected the concept of “real presence” or at least explained it by saying that in the experience of communion, the Holy Spirit mystically lifts the believer up to heaven, there to dine with Christ. In truth, I think there is something to that, because every time we partake of communion it ought to be a truly mystical experience of sitting at table with Christ, and that is why I always proclaim that we come to the table at Christ’s invitation, no exceptions.

Let us prepare our hearts to receive the bread of life and the cup of joy as we sing.

AMEN.