

The Calvinists: a Reply to Gerald Harris

By Mark Lamprecht, HereIBlog.com

Gerald Harris, editor of the *The Christian Index*, the Georgia Southern Baptist newspaper, recently published the article “The Calvinists are here.”¹ There have been two immediate responses to Harris’ piece including one by former Calvinist William Birch² and an article in the Baptist Press in which some of the people mentioned by Harris answered his concerns.³ Harris’ article seems to be pieced together without a thesis. The article seems strung together by insinuations built upon a connect-the-dots type of guilt by association. In short, there is a lot to untangle in Harris’ article.

In the following response, which has been broken into two parts, I will attempt to untangle some of Harris’ insinuations and point out that his his dots do not actually connect to support insinuations that Calvinism is a problem. Sections of Harris’ article will be quoted and interacted with so this article will be long, but necessary.

Why is this response necessary?

This response is necessary for the sake of encouraging Southern Baptists from differing theological perspectives to move beyond casting judgements based upon personal bias. The response is necessary to encourage continuing working together for the sake of the gospel while embracing one another in Christ without questioning each others motives every step of the way. Remember, love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things (1 Cor. 13:7) and love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). I hold Mr. Harris as a brother in Christ who has served the body of Christ through the SBC for many years. Being the editor of a state Baptist paper, Mr. Harris has a large reach. I pray that his reach be better used to serve Southern Baptists in building bridges rather than widening gaps. Instead, what Harris has offered at this point does not help build up the body of Christ. It would be more beneficial if we Southern Baptists would start talking *to* each other instead *at* and *past* each other.

This article will attempt to give another perspective of what Harris insinuates as problematic for the SBC by examining the rest of the story.

The title of Harris’ article, “The Calvinists are here” may be the closest the reader comes to getting a thesis statement. Is Harris merely observing based on the title that Calvinists are present in the Southern Baptist Convention or Christendom? Were Calvinists absent for some time? Is Harris personally pro-Calvinist, anti-Calvinist or Calvinist neutral? Since his article is an opinion piece, what, exactly, is his opinion?

Mr. Harris begins his article by mentioning influential theologian John Calvin and the popularity of Calvin’s doctrine of predestination which Harris claims to be the foundation of Calvin’s theology. Whatever one believes about the foundation of Calvin’s theology is should noted that he wrote extensively on the topics of prayer and on the Holy Spirit.

Harris then summarizes the five points of Calvinism which arose after Calvin had gone to be the the Lord. As a Southern Baptist writing in a Southern Baptist paper, it may have served his fellow Baptists better had Harris pointed readers to the theology of the Southern Baptist Founders, some of whose work may be found online.⁴ This is not to say that Calvin did not influence both early and modern Southern Baptists, but the whole Protestant movement has influenced Southern Baptists.

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In other words, why not start with the theology of those who actually started the Southern Baptist Convention? Is there a fear that informing Southern Baptists about SBC beginnings may possibly lead to people considering the theology of many of the Founders? Maybe Calvin is an easier example from which to encourage Baptists to distance themselves since he was a paedobaptist.

There are also those who hold to Reformed theology who believe limited atonement means that the death and resurrection of Christ is the substitutionary payment for the sins of only those who are God's elect children, but not the entire world.

This statement is somewhat nuanced. Regardless of one's theology, only the elect, i.e. those who believe the gospel, are ultimately the only ones to whom Christ's substitutionary atonement will be applied. Granted, there are different understandings of how one is elected. Whether one believes, as James P. Boyce, that election is based on God's will and not on foreseen faith; or that election is based on foreseen faith, the atonement will ultimately only be applied to the elect, universalism not withstanding.

Many who embrace Reformed theology are motivated to allow it to influence their church polity by substituting congregational church government with an elder system of church government.

This statement on church polity is also nuanced. This statement may lead readers to believe that any church with elders is operating like a Presbyterian church which is not the case. I have pointed out that current SBC President Bryant Wright, who is not a Calvinist, has an elder system of church government.⁵ Since it is not Reformed theology, what then is Wright's influence for having elders in the local church? Why were no alarms sounded when he was first elected president? Even mega-church pastor Andy Stanley, son of famous Southern Baptist Charles Stanley, who could hardly be labeled as Reformed, serves North Point Community Church which has elders. Also, note that even early Anabaptists, with whom some Southern Baptists feel a spiritual kinship, had elders within their church polity.

While that works well for some churches, James MacDonald, a self-proclaimed Calvinist and member of the advisory board for LifeWay's new Sunday School curriculum, writes, "Congregational government is an invention and tool of the enemy of our souls to destroy the church of Jesus Christ."

First, James MacDonald recently shared that he was "never entirely comfortable with the title 'reformed'" and would score no higher than 3.8 out of 5 points on the Calvinist test.⁶ MacDonald certainly did say that congregationalism is of Satan.⁷ Myself and several others reacted publicly to this charge on social media networks such as twitter. The most immediate and thorough response came from Calvinist writer Jonathan Leeman at the 9Marks blog.⁸ Many of MacDonald's most vocal critics of have been Calvinists. Connecting the dots from MacDonald to Calvinism in an effort to seemingly discredit Calvinism does not hold. Therefore, Harris should not have a problem with Calvinism, but with MacDonald and LifeWay.

Let's further consider the connection between MacDonald and LifeWay. I do not know why MacDonald was involved with LifeWay's new curriculum. Hiring him is not something I would

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have done, but Harris seems to have missed something on his radar. See, 3.8 point Calvinist, MacDonald, along with Church of Christ pastor Max Lucado, are individually among the top-selling authors at LifeWay.⁹

Assuming Harris is worried about the theological content LifeWay makes available, it would seem that he would have been concerned prior to the new curriculum. Of course, the new curriculum is material printed with LifeWay's name on it, but nonetheless LifeWay is a conduit for getting particular Bible studies in the hands of many Southern Baptists regardless of who publishes them. The average Southern Baptist who shops at LifeWay may be influenced by any and all products sold. Could there be any theological issues with certain authors due to their non-Calvinistic positions?

Harris next mentions Mark Dever's article "Where'd All These Calvinists Come From?" which gives ten reasons Calvinism is re-emerging. Harris writes nothing else about Dever's article other than to point it out. This may be one of the reasons why Harris' article has been criticized as being pieced together. He then moves to Frank Page who said the following.

"I think the challenges confronting the SBC today are different than they have been in decades past. I think one of the issues, which is a tremendous challenge for us, is the theological divide of Calvinism and non-Calvinism."

"Everyone is aware of this but few want to talk about this in public. The reason is obvious. It is deeply divisive in many situations and is disconcerting in others. At some point we are going to see the challenges ensuing from this divide become even more problematic for us. I regularly receive communications from churches who are struggling over this issue."

The divide will continue if articles like Harris' continue. Who is making Calvinism the divisive issue, Calvinists or non-Calvinists? Harris' article should give the readers a hint.

Jerry Vines is quoted next with what seems to be contradictory positions on Calvinists. Since Harris is quoting Vines, does he hold the same opinion that Vines shares in the following quotes? The following replies are to Vines' with Harris in mind as one who tacitly agrees.

"Theologically, will the issue of Calvinism create further division in the SBC? I have been an SBC preacher over 50 years. I have worked quite well with my Calvinist friends, many of whom I invited to preach for me. I have no desire to run all Calvinists out of the SBC; I think it would be divisive and wrong."

Jerry Vines' statements have drawn recent responses.¹⁰ Note that Vines has worked "quite well" with his Calvinist friends so why not model for the rest of us how to do so? While he states that has no desire to run *all* Calvinists out of the SBC, does he desire to run *some* of them out? Which ones and why? Would running only *some* Calvinists out of the SBC also be divisive and wrong?

Harris continues quoting Vines.

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“But, current attempts to move the SBC to a Calvinistic soteriology (doctrine of salvation) are divisive and wrong. As long as groups and individuals seek to force Calvinism upon others in the Convention, there will be problems. There is a form of Calvinism that is militant, hostile and aggressive that I strongly oppose. I have stated before, so it’s not new news, that should the SBC move towards five-point Calvinism it will be a move away from, not toward, the Gospel.”

Who is attempting to move the entire SBC to a Calvinistic soteriology? I’m sure there is a form of militant, hostile and aggressive Calvinism, but who in the SBC is promoting such an animal? Is it also divisive and wrong, or possibly hostile and aggressive, to claim that a move toward Calvinism, a theology in which the SBC was rooted, is a move away from the gospel? What if someone started as a “one-point Calvinist” and gradually moved to two, and then three points? Does the acceptance of each point move this person further away from the gospel? Is it amazing to Vines/Harris that anyone is even saved in a church with a Calvinist preacher?

I digress. Harris continues.

According to LifeWay Research, the SBC’s, statistical arm, 10 percent of all SBC pastors now identify themselves as Calvinists and a third of recent graduates from SBC seminaries espouse Reformed doctrines, with Southern Seminary in Louisville, KY, a particular source.

The best I can tell is that the research to which Harris alludes is from a 2006 LifeWay study and a 2007 NAMB study.¹¹ According to the studies, there are no percentages given to compare the differences by which each seminary is graduating Calvinists. Actually, on page 14 of the surveys, the SBC seminaries are listed in descending order in proportion to their graduates who are Calvinists. While Southern tops the list in the 2007 NAMB study followed by Midwestern, Golden Gate, Southwestern, New Orleans and Southeastern; the 2006 LifeWay study has Golden Gate leading the way followed by Southeastern, New Orleans, Southwestern, Midwestern, and, finally, Southern.

It would be surprising if The Gospel Project, a Sunday School curriculum for all ages that LifeWay will soon be rolling out, were not marked by an unmistakable Reformed theology...The advisory council and writers for The Gospel Project (including D.A. Carson, Matt Chandler, James MacDonald, Eric Mason, Joe Thorn, Juan Sanchez, Collin Hansen, former North American Mission Board missionary to the Internet Afshin Ziafat and Geoff Ashley – for the most part looks like a Who’s Who of Reformed theologians.

Why would it be surprising if The Gospel Project were not marked by an unmistakable Reformed theology? Trevin Wax, managing editor of “The Gospel Project” answered questions that speak to Harris’ allegations.¹² One may either distrust Wax’s answers and believe he is lying or one may graciously accept that Wax is being truthful and is not trying to promote Reformed theology.

Speaking of divisiveness. Continuing.

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The average Baptist who sits in a Sunday School class or a small Bible study group has depended on LifeWay to provide Bible study materials that are true to the Word of God and representative of historic Baptist theology. However, for bane or blessing LifeWay President Thom Rainer seems to have led the SBC literature-producing agency to become more and more Reformed in its theological content.

See the note in part I about LifeWay's best-selling material from James MacDonald and Max Lucado. Also, under on LifeWay's website under "LifeWay Select" one can find material by Ed Young, Jr. (more on Young later).

Harris then writes about NAMB's recent *On Mission* magazine that "highlights several church planters, two of whom could be seen as Reformed in their theology." I am not sure to what number "several" alludes for the church planters featured, but Harris picks out only two that may be Calvinists. Is featuring two Calvinist church planters out of several too many?

One planter, Won Kwak, is affiliated with Doctrines of Grace Church Planters who seek to plant sovereign grace churches. The other planter is Bland Mason, the pastor of City on a Hill. Harris doesn't make an explicit point, but pointing out that these two church plants are Calvinistic insinuates that something is inherently problematic. Why?

I had the privilege of meeting Bland [Mason] in December and really like him. He is also the chaplain of the Boston Red Sox, which makes him particularly special to me.

Harris got to meet Mason whose position as chaplain of the Red Sox makes him special to Harris. Yet, he continues about Mason.

"We plant Southern Baptist churches that adhere to the Baptist Faith and Message and support the Cooperative Program." Kevin Ezell, president North American Mission Board. Some have been critical of City on a Hill being featured in On Mission because it is also included on the Acts 29 Network website as one of its churches.

NAMB President Kevin Ezell recently explained that Mason's church was recommended for inclusion in the magazine by the leadership of the Baptist Convention of New England, that Mason is a soul winner, and that the church is an ardent supporter of the Cooperative Program.

What Ezell mentioned about the Baptist Faith and Message and the Cooperative Program line-up with exactly with what City on a Hill church is doing. The state convention of New England recommended Mason and calls him a soul winner. Aren't these the types of church planters that Southern Baptists desire? I'm sure the New England state convention knows Mason better than those on the outside. Why is the Acts 29 affiliation a problem? Harris does not say. Is there a specific charge against Mason or is this an insinuation that is supposed to lead the reader to think poorly of Mason?

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Some contend that churches associated with the Acts 29 Network are anathema because of their identification with the Network's founder and lead visionary, controversial Seattle pastor Mark Driscoll. The Network is also admittedly evangelical, missional and Reformed in its approach to church planting.

Ah, maybe the real problem is Mark Driscoll or is it the claim of Acts 29 of being “evangelical, missional and Reformed?” Are individual SBC churches not allowed to be evangelical, missional or Reformed? Harris points out that Ezell is not concerned and neither “endorses nor criticizes” SBC churches involved with Acts 29. Ezell is concerned with the Cooperative Program and the Baptist Faith and Message. Might one deduce, based on Harris’ article, that Ezell is not doing his due diligence with churches affiliated with Acts 29? Is Ezell in stealth mode secretly promoting Acts 29 churches? What is Harris’ specific problem with Acts 29 affiliates?

More importantly, is it Calvinism’s fault that Driscoll is controversial?

Although Acts 29 only has 288 churches in its network in the U.S., Driscoll seems to have a significant influence in the lives of some Southern Baptists.

What constitutes significant influence by Driscoll in some Southern Baptist lives? Who are these Southern Baptists and how does Harris know? Is Driscoll’s influence positive or negative and what does this have to do with Calvinism?

It should be noted that Mark and Grace Driscoll have written a book entitled “Real Marriage: The Truth About Sex, Friendship and Life Together.” The book has shocked conservatives with its graphic sexual descriptions and alarmed liberals because of its degradation of women.

Now Harris has jumps from Acts 29 to Mark Driscoll to Mark and Grace Driscolls’ latest book *Real Marriage*. He even quotes liberal blogger Rachel Held Evans’ opposition to *Real Marriage* with whom I would guess Harris has little in common theologically. Harris also cites Calvinistic Southern Baptist professor Denny Burk who wrote a highly critical review of *Real Marriage*. However, what does any of this have to do with Calvinism in the SBC?

The book [Real Marriage] would hardly be worth mentioning except for the fact that Southeastern Seminary President Danny Akin and his wife Charlotte endorsed it. In recent years Driscoll has been a chapel speaker at SEBTS and his influence at the seminary cannot be ignored.

Again, what does this book have to do with Calvinism in the SBC? Driscoll is at best a four-point Calvinist, yet he and his wife are not promoting Calvinism in their marriage book. Also, Danny Akin answered Harris in the above noted Baptist Press article as well as providing a more thorough response as to why he endorsed the book on the Between the Times blog.¹³ Whether or not one agrees with Akin’s endorsement of *Real Marriage*, I do not, the endorsement is simply not a Calvinist issue.

This is another case of connect-the-dots insinuations.

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Let's (dis)connect some dots.

Mark Driscoll claims to be a Calvinist, but the problems with Driscoll, from his language to overt sex talk and now his book *Real Marriage*, are not problems of Calvinism. While some Calvinists support Driscoll, others have not been silent in their criticisms. John MacArthur, for example, has arguably been one of Driscoll's biggest critics.¹⁴ The ever popular Calvinist TeamPyro bloggers have also been highly critical of Driscoll.¹⁵

Harris' has written that there is some concern about Driscoll's influence among Southern Baptists. Speaking of concern, maybe Southern Baptists have some in-house issues to think about.

At about the same time Driscoll's *Real Marriage* came out, the book *Sexperiment*, by SBC pastor Ed Young, Jr., and wife, Lisa debuted on the NY Times best sellers list.¹⁶ Young pastors an SBC mega-church with five campuses. He received a lot of flack for the stunts he used to promote his sex book. Young has also written books with his father, a past SBC president, that are featured on LifeWay's site. Despite Young's sex book, his SBC influence and connections, no one seems to be connecting the dots to his non-Calvinist theology as being a problem.

There are influential non-Calvinist SBC pastors connected with MacDonald and Driscoll. Jack Graham, who pastors the fourth largest SBC mega-church, Prestonwood Baptist Church with attendance of 14,323 and Perry Noble, who pastors NewSpring Church with attendance of 10,807.¹⁷ The attendance between these two churches alone speaks to an influence of over 25,000 Southern Baptists. Should Southern Baptists be concerned?

In 2011, Noble participated with Driscoll and MacDonald, among others, in the first Elephant Room. He defended his use of the song "Highway to Hell" in their Easter church service. Some Calvinists actually addressed Noble's song choice for a worship service.¹⁸ Should Southern Baptists be concerned over Noble's influence and non-Calvinism?

This year, 2012, Jack Graham participated in The Elephant Room II with Driscoll, MacDonald and T.D. Jakes.¹⁹ Graham and Jakes, whose theology and affiliations are questionable²⁰, began partnering in ministry ministry 10 years ago.

In 2011, several Southern Baptists wrote letters of doctrinal concern about one of Jakes' music ministers, Jamal Jones, who was to participate in the Pastors Conference.²¹ The end result was Jones withdrawal from the event. However, Graham is still a ministry affiliate of Jakes and Graham has even spoken at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Chapel all ready in 2012. Should Southern Baptists be concerned about the influence Graham may have over SWBTS students as well as Graham's non-Calvinism?

Coming up in April 2012, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary is again hosting the Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum where Roman Catholic philosopher/apologist Peter Kreeft is a featured panelist representing the Christian position.²² Should Southern Baptists be concerned about the potential Roman Catholic influence of its seminary students? The following quote is an example of Kreeft's theology from an Amazon review.

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There is one portion of this book that is truly bizarre. Mr. Kreeft claims to have had an out of body experience while surfing in Hawaii. During this experience, he “soul-surfed” and landed on a “Heavenly beach.” [p. 86] There, he met and spoke with Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed, and Moses. In the afterlife, all have become pious Roman Catholics. Nonetheless, Mohamed still teaches (and Kreeft appears to agree) that the Koran is “divine revelation.” [pp. 103-4] This stuff goes on for twenty-five pages. Mr. Kreeft purports that his recounting of this ecumenical beach party is in some sense “true.” [p. 86] No, I’m not making this up.²³

If Harris is worried about negative influences in Southern Baptist life, then the dots I just connected should give him some things other than Calvinism to worry about. That is, unless, he sees Calvinism as the true root of all potential and real problems in the SBC. If so, Harris has yet to prove his case against Calvinism. Also, is he going to blame non-Calvinism for the potential problems in the above connections just made?

There is a growing perception that Southern Seminary has become a seedbed for a brand of Calvinism that is quite different from the Reformed theology of its founder, James Petigru Boyce, and also a training ground for Reformed church planters. Therefore, it appears that some of our institutions and agencies are giving, at the least, tacit approval to Reformed theology or are, at the most, actively on a path to honor, if not implement Reformed theology and methodology in their institutions.

It would be helpful if Harris would explain how this *brand* of Calvinism is different from Boyce’s *brand*. Should judgements be passed on perception alone when voicing concerns over whether or not a seminary is a “seedbed” for a certain *brand* of Calvinism? Can Harris prove his allegations about Southern and Calvinism? Maybe it is articles like Harris’ that give Southern Baptists the wrong perceptions about Southern. Even the NAMB/LifeWay studies cited by Harris show that it is not just Southern Seminary that is graduating Calvinists.

Harris’ assertions do not seem the best way to foster cooperative relationships in the SBC.

While most of the Reformed pastors and churchmen I know are gracious and godly people with a profound devotion to the Word of God, Southern Baptists must decide if they are satisfied with what I would call the presumable encroachment of Calvinism in SBC life.

If most Reformed Christians that Harris knows are such godly people then what is he worried about? Is he worried that Calvinism may get the credit for such godly Christians?

Let’s rephrase Harris’ words for consistency.

While most of the Reformed pastors and churchmen I know are gracious and godly people with a profound devotion to the Word of God, Southern Baptists must decide if they are satisfied with gracious and godly people with a profound devotion to the Word of God in SBC life.

By using Harris’ own description of Reformed pastors and churchmen to define what the encroachment of Calvinism in SBC life may look like, what is there to worry about?

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Harris ends his article with the mention of a possible name change to the SBC. How the name change has anything to do with Calvinism is unclear like many of the connections Harris makes. Again, what is being insinuated by tacking on ruminations about a name change?

If that is the suggested name and if we dare vote for it to be our new appellation we dare not defame it with half-hearted evangelism and church plants that wither away in five years.

Has the SBC name been defamed with inflated church membership roles? How about the membership and giving declines in recent years? Southern Baptists may have half-hearted evangelism and failing church plants regardless of the name. Again, what does this have to do with Calvinism?

“To cooperate or not cooperate within the SBC?” is one question, but a better question may be, “Who is truly making a concerted effort to cooperate within the SBC?”

For what it’s worth...

Mark

P.s. The following questions were asked by a Georgia Southern Baptist pastor.

1. Did Dr. White give approval to this editorial before it was published?
2. If so, why risk the good will that was accomplished through the younger leaders meeting in October, especially in light of the fact that he knew that over half that room consisted of Calvinist pastors?
3. If not, what does Dr. White think of this editorial and why not come out and immediately try to rebuild the bridges that may have been burned because of this editorial?
4. Does Dr. White, after seeing this – whether or not he knew about it beforehand – worry about a further cutting of CP giving by Calvinist Pastors who may see this and lead their churches away from giving or away from giving more? What of those like myself who may choose to forgo the CP to give directly to the Convention and its entities?

1. J. Gerald Harris. [The Calvinists are here](#). The Christian Index. Full text may be found here: [Georgia Index’s Gerald Harris on “The Calvinists are here”](#). ↵
2. William Birch. [The Calvinists Have Been Here...](#) ↵
3. Erin Roach. [‘Encroachment of Calvinism’ concerns editor](#). ↵
4. [Founders Library](#). founders.org ↵
5. [Southern Baptist Church Offices, Elders et al.](#) ↵
6. James MacDonald. [Why I Resigned From The Gospel Coalition](#) ↵
7. Dr. James MacDonald. [Congregational Government is From Satan](#). ↵
8. Jonathan Leeman. [Congregationalism Is Used by Satan...Like He Uses Everything Else](#). ↵
9. [Bible Study](#). LifeWay.com ↵
10. [A Response to Jerry Vines on Calvinism and Southern Baptists](#) ↵
11. Ed Stetzer. [Calvinism and SBC Church Leadership:Key Findings and Evangelistic Implications](#). LifeWay Research. ↵
12. Dave Miller. [The Gospel Project: An Interview with Trevin Wax](#). SBCVoices.com ↵

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13. Daniel Akin. [“Why I Endorsed Real Marriage by Mark and Grace Driscoll and What I Disagree With.”](#) [Betweentheimes.com](#) ↵
14. [Grace to You Driscoll search.](#) [gty.org](#) ↵
15. [Mark Driscoll label.](#) [TeamPyro.blogspot.com](#) ↵
16. Stoyan Zaimov. [Ed Young’s Controversial ‘Sexperiment’ Book Debuts on NY Times Best Sellers List.](#) [Christianpost.com](#) ↵
17. Thom Rainer. [Megachurches in the Southern Baptist Convention.](#) [thomrainer.com](#) ↵
18. Phil Johnson. [Highway to Hell.](#) [Teampyro.blogspot.com](#) ↵
19. [The Conversations—Round 2.](#) [theelephantroom.com](#) ↵
20. [Elephant Room II and TD Jakes’ Oneness Association](#) ↵
21. [Open Email: SBC Pastors’ Conference 2011 Doctrinal Concern](#) ↵
22. [Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum 2012 – A dialogue between Dr. Michael Shermer and Dr. Gary Habermas.](#) [SBCToday.com](#) ↵
23. [Ecumenical Jihad](#) by Peter Kreeft. [review on Amazon.com](#) ↵