Not in her evangelical upbringing prepared Laura Watkins for John Piper.

“I was used to a very conversational preaching style,” said Watkins, 21. “And having someone wave his arms and talk really loudly made me a little scared.”

Watkins shouldn’t be embarrassed. Piper does scare some people. It’s probably his unrelenting intensity, demanding discipline, and singular passion—for the glory of God. Those themes resound in *Desiring God*, Piper’s signature book. The pastor for preaching and vision at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis has sold more than 275,000 copies of *Desiring God* since 1986. Piper has personally taken his message of “Christian hedonism” to audiences around the world, such as the Passion conferences for college-age students. Passion attracted 40,000 students outside Memphis in 2000 and 18,000 to Nashville earlier this year.

Not all of these youth know Piper’s theological particulars. But plenty do, and Piper, more than anyone else, has contributed to a resurgence of Reformed theology among young people. You can’t miss the trend at some of the leading evangelical seminaries, like Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, which reports a significant Reformed uptick among students over the past 20 years. Or the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, now the largest Southern Baptist seminary and a Reformed hotbed. Piper, 60, has tinged the movement with the God-exalting intensity of Jonathan Edwards, the 18th-century Puritan pastor-theologian. Not since the decades after his death have evangelicals heaped such attention on Edwards.

Reformed theology often goes by the name Calvinism, after the renowned 16th-century Reformation theologian John Calvin. Yet even Edwards rejected the label, saying he neither depended on Calvin nor always agreed with him. Still, it is Calvin’s followers who produced the famous acrostic TULIP to describe the “doctrines of grace” that are the hallmarks of traditional Reformed theology: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. (See “It’s All About God,” p. 35.)

Already, this latest surge of Reformed theology has divided Southern Baptist churches and raised questions about the future of missions. Its exuberant young advocates reject generic evangelicalism and tout the benefits of in-depth biblical doctrine. They have once again brought the perennial debate about God’s sovereignty and humans’ free will to the forefront.

The evidence for the resurgence is partly institutional and partly anecdotal. But it’s something that a variety of church
leaders observe. While the Emergent “conversation” gets a lot of press for its appeal to the young, the new Reformed movement may be a larger and more pervasive phenomenon. It certainly has a much stronger institutional base. I traveled to some of the movement’s leading churches and institutions and talked to theologians, pastors, and parishioners, trying to understand Calvinism’s new appeal and how it is changing American churches.

GOD STARTS THE PARTY

A pastors’ conference is the wrong place to schedule a private meeting with Joshua Harris. He didn’t even speak at the conference I attended, but we still struggled to find a quiet spot to talk at his hotel. Slight and short, Harris doesn’t stick out in crowds. That doesn’t stop pastors from recognizing him and introducing themselves. The unassuming 31-year-old took time to chat with each of them, even as our interview stretched late into the night.

Harris was a leader among his generation even before he published Kissed Dating Goodbye in 1997. But the bestseller introduced him to a wider evangelical audience, earning many fans and at least as many detractors. Now he pastors Covenant Life Church, a congregation of 3,800 in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Harris grew up as a youth leader in a seeker-sensitive church and later joined a charismatic congregation. 

Neither place emphasized doctrine. “Even just thinking doctrinally would have been foreign to me,” he explained. He knew enough to realize he didn’t like Calvinism, though. “I remember some of the first encounters I had with Calvinists,” Harris told another group of pastors during Mark Driscoll’s Reform and Reuse conference in Seattle in May. “I was very happy to see that they represented the doctrines of grace with a total lack of grace. They were spiteful, cliquish, and arrogant. I didn’t even stick around to understand what they were teaching. I took one look at them and knew I didn’t want any part of it.”

Harris’s response is anything but uncommon in evangelical history. Reformed theology has periodically boomed and busts. Calvinists have always inspired foils, such as Jacob Arminius. The history. Reformed theology has periodically boomed and busted. Reformers have represented the doctrines of grace with a total lack of grace. They were spiteful, cliquish, and arrogant. I didn’t even stick around to understand what they were teaching. I took one look at them and knew I didn’t want any part of it.”

Reformed theology waned so that the party can get started.”

Theological depth attracted Harris. Passion conferences also inspired Harris to trust in a God who takes the initiative. Harris first attended Passion in 1999 and the help of conference founder Louie Giglio to plan a similar event, from which blossomed Harris’s New Attitude conferences. “Someone like Louie is saying, ‘You know what, it’s not about us, it’s about God’s glory, it’s about his renown.’ Now I don’t think most kids realize this, but that’s the first step down a path of Reformed theology. Because if you say that it’s not about you, well then you’re on that road of saying it’s not about your actions, your choices, your determinations.”

Passion’s God-exalting focus keeps Piper coming back to speak year after year. He attributes the attraction of Reformed theology to the spirit of Passion—namely, pairing demanding obedience with God’s grandeur. “They’re not going to embrace your theology unless it makes their hearts sing,” Piper said.

MORE THAN A “CRACZY GUY”

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Moderate and liberal professors. Mohler addressed the faculty and re-enforced the school’s confession of faith, derived from the landmark Reformed document, the Westminster Confession.

“I said, in sum, if this is what you believe, then we want you to stay. If not, then you have come here under false pretenses, and you must go,” Mohler, now 45, said. “As they would say, the battle was joined.”

Indeed, television cameras and news helicopters made it difficult for Mohler to work for a while. He still isn’t welcome in some Louisville churches. That’s not surprising, since no more than 4 faculty members—from more than 100—stayed with Southern after Mohler arrived.

Now it’s hard to believe that less than 15 years ago, Southern merited a reputation as a liberal seminary. Mohler has attracted a strong faculty and spurred enrollment to more than 4,300 students—which makes it the largest Southern Baptist seminary. But Mohler has also highlighted some Louisville churches. That’s not surprising, because they were not raised in an environment that would make you so much more grateful for his grace.”

Mohler explained that Calvinism offers themselves in a hostile environment.”

“Or if they were, as soon as they arrived on a university campus, they found themselves in a hostile environment.”

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leaders only intensified his study of Reformed theology. He became emboldened to persuade others.

“I felt like Calvinism was more than abstract points of theology,” said Cochran, 25. “I felt you would get a much bigger view of God if you accepted these things, an understanding of justice and grace that would so deepen your affections for God, that would make you so much more grateful for his grace.”

Cochran bolstered his arguments by boasting that he had never even read Calvin. Indeed, the renowned reformer appears not to be a major figure among the

Kentucky. He hated Sunday mornings, and by age 15 he had raked up a police rap sheet and developed a drug problem. But Cochran’s troubles softened his heart to the gospel, and he fled his hometown to understand how he squared God’s sovereignty choice with evangelism. Those challenges

latest generation to claim the theology he Mohler explained that Calvinism offers themselves in a hostile environment.”

Lemke noted that Calvinism has periodically waxed and waned among Southern Baptists. “However, the number of Calvinists dramatically increased [starting in the 1980s] and over the next 20 years,” Lemke and many others explained to me that Calvinists like Mohler earned leadership roles during the Southern Baptist’s inerrancy battles due to their reliably conservative theology. Their academic and biblical rigor suited them for seminary positions. Now, Lemke said, their influence has made the “newest generation of Southern Baptist ministers— the most Calvinist we have in several generations.”

Lemke doubts that Calvinism has yet reached its high-water mark in the SBC. But he is no fan of this trend. Baptism and ministry roles during the Southern Baptist’s inerrancy battles due to their reliably conservative theology. Their academic and biblical rigor suited them for seminary positions. Now, Lemke said, their influence has made the “newest generation of Southern Baptist ministers— the most Calvinist we have in several generations.”

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Leaders of Tomorrow: Calvinist theology has spread among Southern Baptist youth. Mohler noted that Calvinists have long chafed at such charges. “I think the criticism of Reformed theology is being silenced by the mission and justice and evangelism and worship and counseling—the whole range of pastoral life,” Piper said. “We’re not the kind who are off in a Grand Rapids ghetto cross- ing our t’s and dotting our i’s and telling the world to get their act together. We’re in the New Orleans slums with groups like Desire Street Ministries, raising up black elders through Reformed theology from 9-year-old boys who had no chance.”

DEEP INTO DOCTRINE

Calvinistic Baptists often told me they have less of a problem with churches that don’t teach election than with churches that downplay doctrine in general. An SBC life piece published in April by Daniel Akin, a former Southern professor and current president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, presented this perspective. “Let us be known for our rigorously biblical, searching the Scriptures to determine what God really says on [God’s] sovereignty and other key doctrinal issues,” Akin wrote. “For the most part, we are not doing this, and our theological shallowness is an indictment of our current state and an embarrassment to our history!”

The young people I talked to want churches to risk disagreement so they can benefit from the deeper challenges of doctrine. Joshua Harris said years after he graduated from high school, he bumbled into his old youth pastor in the grocery store. The pastor seemed apologetic as they reminded about the youth group’s party atmosphere, focused more on music and skits than Bible teaching, Harris said. But the youth pastor told Harris his students now read through Wayne Grudem’s Systematic Theology. “I think there’s an expectation that teens can’t handle that, or they’ll be repulsed by that,” Harris told me. “[My youth pastor] is saying the exact opposite. That’s a dramatic change in philosophy in youth ministry.”

Pastor Kent Hughes senses the same draw for students who cross the street from Wheaton College to attend College. “If there’s an appeal to students, it’s that we’re not playing around,” Hughes said. “We’re not entertaining them. This is life and death. My sense is that’s what’s interested in, even from an old man.”

Perhaps an attraction to serious doctrine brought about 3,000 ministry leaders to
Young people seem to reject the dichotomy between mission and doctrine.

Louisville in April for a Together for the Gospel conference. The conference’s sponsors included Mohler and Mahaney, and Piper also spoke. Most of the audience were in their 20s and 30s. Each of the seven speakers holds to the five points of TULIP. Yet none of them spoke of Calvinism unless I asked about it. They did express worry about perceived evangelical accommodation to postmodernism and criticized churches for applying business models to ministry. They mostly joked about their many differences on such historically difficult issues as baptism, church government, eschatology, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They drew unity as Calvinist evangelicals from their concerns: with seeker churches, church-growth marketing, and manipulative revival techniques.

Roger Olson, professor of theology at Truett Seminary, Baylor University, said more than just Calvinists worry about these problems. “A lot of us evangelical Arminians agree with them in their criticisms of popular folk religion,” Olson said. “I agree with their basic theological underpinnings—that doctrine is important, that grace is the decisive factor in salvation, not a decision we make.”

If Olson is right, co-belligerency on these concerns could forestall further conflict, at least on the Calvinist-Arminian debate.

A PASSION FOR PURITANS

Mark Dever hasn’t sold books to the degree Piper has. And he doesn’t head a flagship institution like his longtime friend Mohler. He doesn’t even pastor a megachurch. But oh, how strategic his church is. Hop off Washington, D.C.’s Metro on the Capitol South stop. Head north past the Library of Congress and the Capitol. Turn right and bear east before you reach the Supreme Court. A couple blocks later you’ll see Capitol Hill Baptist Church, which Dever has led for 12 years, beginning when he was 33.

Yet location isn’t what makes Dever’s church so strategic. Maybe it’s all the political maneuvering in the air, but Dever network effectively. He conceived Together for the Gospel and otherwise works to connect conservative evangelicals who worry about the same things. Dever’s church also trains six interns at a time, imprinting his beliefs about how a local church should run through a related ministry, 9 Marks.

I visited Capitol Hill Baptist in January. The church kicked off with Sunday school, which really should have been called Sunday-dray seminar. Class options included a survey of the New Testament, spiritual disciplines, and a systematic theology lesson on theories of the Atonement. Such rigor can be expected from a church led by Dever, who earned a Ph.D. from Cambridge studying the Puritans. He embodies the pastoral theologians who are leading young people toward Reformed theology. He has cultivated a church community in the Puritan mold—unquestionably demanding and disciplined. And the church attracts a very young crowd. Its 525 members average age 29 years old. Dever mockingly rejected my suggestion that they aim to attract an under-30 crowd. “Yes, that’s easy. That’s not because the debate will go away—for the foreseeable future, the spread of Calvinism will force many evangelicals to pick sides. And it’s not because mission will trump doctrine—young people seem to reject this dichotomy.

“It’s because the young Calvinists value theological systems far less than God and his Word. Whatever the cultural factors, many Calvinist converts respond to hallmark passages like Romans 9 and Ephesians 1. “I really don’t like to raise any banner of Calvinism or Reformed theology,” said Eric Loneragan, a 23-year-old University of Minnesota graduate. “Those are just terms. I just like to look at the Word and let it speak for itself.”

That’s the essence of what Joshua Harris calls “humble orthodoxy.” He reluctantly debates doctrine, but he passionately studies Scripture and seeks to apply all its truth.

“If you really understand Reformed theology, we should all just sit around shaking our heads going, ‘It’s unbelievable. Why would God choose any of us?’” Harris said. “You are so amazed by grace, you’re not picking a fight with anyone, you’re not crying tears of amazement that should lead to a heart for lost people, that God does indeed save, when he doesn’t have to save anybody.”

Collin Hansen is an associate editor of CT.
Reformed theology often goes by the name Calvinism, after the renowned 16th-century Reformation theologian John Calvin. Yet even 1.