Why I Am a Calvinist, Part 2
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. . and why every Christian is a Calvinist of sorts.

Part II: Spurgeon: "Calvinism IS the Gospel"

There are, these days, quite a few self-styled Calvinists who disagree with my assessment of Arminianism and insist that Arminianism entails an absolute denial of certain fundamental gospel truths. Those wishing to make that argument will invariably quote a famous statement by Spurgeon, taken from the chapter in his autobiography titled " **A Defence of Calvinism** " in which Spurgeon said this:

I have my own private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what nowadays is called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism; Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel, if we do not preach justification by faith, without works; nor unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel, unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called, and suffers the children of God to be burned in the fires of damnation after having once believed in Jesus. Such a gospel I abhor.

I absolutely agree with what Spurgeon says there, in the sense that he *meant* it. And the context of that statement explains clearly what he meant. He was pointing out that the principle at the heart of all gospel truth is the same principle that drives Calvinism: "*Salvation is of the Lord*." Salvation is *God's* work; it's not something we do for ourselves. That's the truth he was defending.

Spurgeon was not saying that we ought to use the five points of Calvinism the way Campus crusade people use the "Four Spiritual Laws." He wasn't saying that all you ever talk about is the doctrines of election and reprobation you are faithfully preaching the gospel and the whole counsel of God. Unfortunately, I think that's what a lot of careless Calvinists *think* Spurgeon meant when he said "Calvinism *is* the gospel."

But if you read Spurgeon's whole article on Calvinism, he makes very clear what he meant. In fact at the beginning of that very same paragraph—as his preface to remarking that "Calvinism is the gospel"—he wrote this:

"Salvation is of the Lord." [Jonah 2:9.] *That is just an epitome of Calvinism; it is the sum and substance of it.* If anyone should ask me what I mean by a Calvinist, I should reply, "He is one who says, Salvation is of the Lord." I cannot find in Scripture any other doctrine than this. It is the essence of the Bible. "He only is my rock and my salvation." Tell me anything contrary to this truth, and it will be a heresy; tell me a heresy, and I shall find its essence here, that it has departed from this great, this fundamental, this rock truth, "God is my rock and my salvation."

Did Spurgeon believe Arminianism was in error? *Absolutely.* So do I.

Did he believe it was *damnable* error? *Absolutely not*, and he made that clear, too.

At the peak of the Downgrade Controversy, some of Spurgeon's critics accused him of being driven by a doctrinaire Calvinist agenda. *It's not really Modernism that Spurgeon hates*, they said. *It's anything that departs from his old fashioned Calvinism. This whole controversy is a furtive campaign against Arminianism. That's what really has Spurgeon bugged. He thinks modern Christians aren't Calvinistic enough.*

Spurgeon replied in *The Sword and the Trowel* with a paragraph that said this:

Certain antagonists have tried to represent the Down Grade controversy as a revival of the old feud between Calvinists and Arminians. It is nothing of the kind. Many evangelical Arminians are as earnestly on our side as men can be. We do not conceal our own Calvinism in the least; but this conflict is for truths which are common to all believers.

In another place, he was even more explicit:

We care far more for the central evangelical truths than we do for Calvinism as a system; but we believe that Calvinism has in it a conservative force which helps to hold men to the vital truth, and therefore we are sorry to see any quitting it who have once accepted it.

So he had a bone to pick with people who once affirmed the doctrines of grace and had now abandoned Calvinism in favor of new ideas that smacked of Socinianism. But he regarded evangelical Arminians as his true brethren and fellow soldiers—as long as they affirmed the doctrine of justification by faith, the principle of *sola fide*, the absolute authority of Scripture, the penal aspect of Christ's atonement, and other essential gospel truths.

Speaking of Arminians in particular, he said:

Those who hold the eternal verities of salvation, and yet do not see all that we believe and embrace, are by no means the objects of our opposition: our warfare is with men who are giving up the atoning sacrifice, denying the inspiration of Holy Scripture, and casting slurs upon justification by faith. The present struggle is not a debate upon the question of Calvinism or Arminianism, but of the truth of God versus the inventions of men. All who believe the gospel should unite against that “modern thought” which is its deadly enemy.

So Spurgeon did not regard Arminians as hell bound heretics. He regarded them as brethren. Did he think they were in error? Yes? Were they guilty of gross inconsistency in their own theology? He would have answered emphatically, *yes*. Was their main error significant? Spurgeon did not shrink from referring to it as “heresy”—meaning unorthodox doctrine, heterodoxy, serious error. But he was very careful to make clear that he did not regard Arminianism *per se as damnable* heresy or utter apostasy from essential Christianity. Virtually all mainstream Calvinists from the time of the Synod of Dort until now would agree with him on every count.

For example, Gordon Clark, one of the highest of high Calvinists, said this with regard to whether Arminians are authentic Christians or not:

An Arminian may be a truly regenerate Christian; in fact, if he is truly an Arminian and not a Pelagian who happens to belong to an Arminian church, he must be a saved man. But he is not usually, and cannot consistently be *assured* of his salvation. The places in which his creed differs from our Confession confuse the mind, dilute the Gospel, and impair its proclamation.”

Which is to say that Arminianism is inherently inconsistent. Arminians technically affirm the fundamental, essential truths of the gospel. Then they try to build a theology on top of that which is totally inconsistent with the solid foundation they have affirmed.

I agree with that assessment of Arminianism. It’s an attempt to reconcile the sovereignty of God with human responsibility—and the Arminian method of reconciling those two truths involves a view of human free will that is inherently inconsistent with certain gospel truths every Arminian actually affirms.

In some posts yet to come, I will explain further why I believe that is the case.

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