

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

August 1996

Copyright 2003 John W. Robbins Post Office Box 68, Unicoi, Tennessee 37692

Email: Jrob1517@aol.com

Website: www.trinityfoundation.org

Telephone: 423.743.0199

Fax: 423.743.2005

Spurgeon, the Forgotten Calvinist

Godwell Andrew Chan

"Calvinism IS the Gospel, and nothing else."

(C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Vol. I: The Early Years*)

"The longer I live, the clearer does it appear that John Calvin's system is the nearest to perfection."

(*The Forgotten Spurgeon*, by Iain Murray)

"Among all those who have been born of women, there has not risen a greater than John Calvin."

(C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Vol. II: The Full Harvest*)

These three quotations should be sufficient to establish incontrovertibly that Spurgeon was a Calvinist. Unfortunately, there have been many attempts to sweep this fact under the rug. For example, the Kelvedon edition of Spurgeon's sermons removed all his criticism of Arminianism with no warning to the reader of any abridgement.¹ The result of such censorship is that today, while many know Spurgeon to be the "Prince of Preachers," few know that he was a staunch Calvinist. Let us, therefore, hear Spurgeon's own testimony—from his own autobiography—and from his biographer and historian, Iain Murray, what his convictions were.

Testimonies

Charles Haddon Spurgeon began his ministry at the age of nineteen. Right from the start, he was a staunch Calvinist. In a letter to his friend, Charles Spiller, a fellow Baptist minister, he described his chief task as a preacher as follows: "[M]y daily labour is to revive the *old* doctrines of Gill, Owen, Calvin, Augustine and Christ."² He equated Calvinism with historical and Biblical theology: "The doctrine which I preach is that of the Puritans: it is the doctrine of Calvin, the doctrine of Augustine, the doctrine of Paul, the doctrine of the Holy Ghost."³

One critic of Spurgeon's was Silas Henn. In his book, *Spurgeon's Calvinism Examined and Refuted* (1858), Henn said: "[C]omparatively few in these times, amid such enlightened views of Christianity, dare to proclaim, openly and without disguise, the peculiar tenets of John Calvin. Even in many professedly Calvinistic pulpits, the doctrines are greatly modified, and genuine Calvinism is kept back. But there are some who hold it forth in all its length and breadth, and among these, the Rev. C. H.

² Murray, 58.

³ *The Early Years*, 364.

¹ Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, 52.

Spurgeon, the notorious preacher at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens, is the most prominent."⁴

Spurgeon's convictions brought along plenty of enemies and critics, even from within the church. He lamented, "We are cried down as *hypers*; we are reckoned the scum of creation; scarcely a minister looks on us or speaks favourably of us, because we hold strong views upon the divine sovereignty of God, and his divine electings and special love towards his own people."⁵ John Anderson of Helensburgh, a friend of Spurgeon, said of him, "Mr. Spurgeon is a Calvinist, which few of the dissenting ministers in London now are. He preaches salvation, not of man's free will, but of God's good will, which few in London, it is to be feared, now do."⁶

Were these the convictions of an immature preacher of nineteen who would later renege? In 1877, during a picnic at the Pastor's College at which Dr. A. A. Hodge was present, Spurgeon said, "The longer I live, the clearer does it appear that John Calvin's system is the nearest to perfection."⁷ In his mature years, in fact, near the end of his life, he testified, "In theology, I stand where I did when I began preaching, and I stand almost alone."⁸ Of the articles of faith of the church he founded, the Metropolitan Tabernacle, he said, "As for our faith, as a church, you have heard about that already. We believe in the five great points commonly known as Calvinistic. . . . Against all comers, especially against all lovers of Arminianism, we defend and maintain pure gospel truth."⁹

During a vacation to Geneva, Switzerland, to recover from bad health, Spurgeon visited the various sites associated with the great Genevan Reformer. Afterward he wrote a moving eulogy to Calvin in his journal:

Among all those who have been born of women, there has not risen a greater than John Calvin; no age before him ever

produced his equal, and no age afterwards has seen his rival. In theology, he stands alone, shining like a bright fixed star, while other leaders and teachers can only circle round him, at a great distance—as comets go streaming through space—with nothing like his glory or his permanence. Calvin's fame is eternal because of the truth he proclaimed; and even in heaven, although we shall lose the name of the system of doctrine which he taught, it shall be that truth which shall make us strike our golden harps, and sing. . . . For the essence of Calvinism is that we are born again, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, *nor of the will of man*, but of God" (*John 1:13*, emphasis added).¹⁰

Testimonies from Spurgeon himself, and from friends and foes alike all agreed: Spurgeon was indeed a true, full-blooded five-point Calvinist. It takes extreme ignorance to overlook, and extreme prejudice to cover up, this fact.

Hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism

As Spurgeon himself has lamented, hyper-Calvinism is a label gummed to Calvinists like the scarlet letter, regardless of whether they actually were or not. This misrepresentation is to a large extent due to an ignorance of what hyper-Calvinism actually means. What is hyper-Calvinism? Gordon Clark, quoting from Donald Dunkerley's article, "Hyper-Calvinism Today," defines the term as follows:

"the view of Calvinism which holds that "there is no world-wide call to Christ sent out to all sinners, neither are all men bidden to take him as their Savior." Hyper-Calvinists . . . maintain that Christ should be held forth or offered as Savior to those only whom God effectually calls."¹¹

⁴ Murray, 54.

⁵ Murray, 59.

⁶ *The Early Years*, 339.

⁷ *The Early Years*, 79.

⁸ Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Vol. II: The Full Harvest*, 393.

⁹ *The Full Harvest*, 12.

¹⁰ *The Full Harvest*, 29.

¹¹ Gordon Clark, *The Atonement*, 136.

The hyper-Calvinist makes the blunder in logic that since faith is a gift of God (*Ephesians 2:8*) and not of man's free will (true premises), therefore, there should be no evangelism, calling, and commanding men to believe (false conclusion). The fallacy of the Arminian is that since men are indeed commanded to believe (true premise), therefore, faith cannot be a gift of God but must be from man's free will (false conclusions). Spurgeon refuted the hyper-Calvinist and said: "They have said, 'God has a purpose which is certain to be fulfilled, therefore, we will not budge an inch. All power is in the hands of Christ, therefore, we will sit still'; but that is not Christ's way of reading the passage. It is, 'All power is given unto me, *therefore go ye, and do something.*' " ¹²

The Arminians misquote these statements of Spurgeon's to attempt to oppose him to Calvinism. But it is hyper-Calvinism, not Calvinism, which Spurgeon opposed. It is a slander, or just plain stupidity, to call a Calvinist a "hyper-Calvinist" and vice versa. No Calvinists believe that the doctrine of eternal election in any way hinders evangelism. Hyper-Calvinism and Calvinism are two different theologies.

Two Extreme Sides of the Same Truth?

The modern theological cliché is that while Calvinism upholds the sovereignty of God, Arminianism upholds the responsibility of man; these are but two sides of the same Biblical truth. You hear this repeated so often that after a while, like a hypnotic suggestion, you begin to believe it. But nothing can be further from the truth. It is a blatant caricature to view Calvinism as upholding the truth of the sovereignty of God while neglecting the responsibility of man. Calvinism upholds *both* the sovereignty of God *and* the responsibility of man. Arminianism upholds neither.

Spurgeon recognized that the difference between Calvinism and Arminianism is not one of "balance." Spurgeon himself preached the doctrine of the

responsibility of man vigorously, as only a Calvinist can do. Murray puts it succinctly: "The error of Arminianism is not that it holds the Biblical doctrine of responsibility, but that it *equates* this doctrine with an un-Biblical doctrine of 'free-will' and preaches the two things as if they were synonymous." The doctrine of free will is a foundational tenet in Arminianism. Murray further contends: "That man must be *able* to believe and repent in order to be responsible for unbelief and impenitency is a philosophical conception nowhere found in Scripture; in fact, it is directly contrary to Scripture." ¹³

Calvinism and Arminianism are not two sides of the same truth. The difference between them is not one of balance or emphasis. The difference between them is one of truth and heresy. William Tyndale condemned the free will doctrine of the Arminians: "[T]hey go and set up free will with the heathen philosophers, and say that man's free will is the cause why God chooseth one and not the other, contrary unto all of Scripture."¹⁴ Because Arminianism is a heresy, condemned as such by the Synod of Dort, 1619, there can be no middle ground, no compromise, between them. Listen to what Spurgeon said: "The Word of God says they [sinners] cannot come, yet the Arminian says they can."¹⁵ "When some of us preach Calvinism, and some Arminianism, we cannot both be right; it is of no use trying to think we can be—'Yes,' and 'No,' cannot both be true. . . . [Spurgeon is applying the law of contradiction.] Truth does not vacillate like a pendulum which shakes backwards and forwards. . . . One must be right; the other wrong."¹⁶ In a sermon titled "Free Will—A Slave," Spurgeon preached that "Free will has carried many souls to hell, but never a soul to heaven yet." In the same sermon, Spurgeon quoted Martin Luther: "If any man doth ascribe aught of salvation, even the very least, to the free-will of man, he knoweth nothing of grace, and he hath not learnt Jesus Christ aright."

¹³ Murray, 61-62.

¹⁴ Murray, 9.

¹⁵ Murray, 90, quoting from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 53.

¹⁶ Murray, 57.

¹² Murray, 49, quoting from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 42.

In a sermon titled "All of Grace," published a few years before his death, Spurgeon said: "The man believes, but that belief is only one result among many of the implantation of divine life within the man's soul by God Himself. *Even the very will thus to be saved by grace is not of ourselves*, but it is the gift of God."¹⁷ In Arminianism, this Scriptural order is reversed, placing the man's decision before the divine act. Preaching to the unconverted in another sermon, Spurgeon said: "Sinner, unconverted sinner, I warn thee: thou canst never cause thyself to be born again, and though the new birth is absolutely necessary, it is absolutely impossible to thee, unless God the Spirit shall do it."¹⁸ That is the point of *John 3*. Nicodemus saw clearly that it was impossible to be born again. Jesus does not answer and say, "Oh, I was talking about spiritual rebirth, which can be done, and not physical rebirth, which cannot be done." Jesus says the new birth is by the Spirit, and the Spirit gives it to whomever He wants, just like the wind blows to wherever it wants. Regeneration is in the hands of the Spirit, not under the control of the will of man.

For Evangelism or for Mature Audiences Only?

There is a prevalent opinion that says that Calvinism should be, if it is discussed at all, reserved for more mature Christians, not taught to new converts, and certainly never ever preached to the unbelievers in an evangelistic message. This is one result of the idea that Calvinism is somehow incompatible with evangelism. From the several sermons quoted, it is obvious that Spurgeon did not believe that Calvinism should be hidden from the unconverted nor the new believer. Why? Because Calvinism *is* the Gospel:

[T]here 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 . . . , after having once believed in Jesus. Such a gospel I abhor.¹⁹

Those who preach a gospel devoid of the five points commonly called Calvinism are not preaching the Gospel at all, but a false gospel.

If Calvinism is appropriate for the unconverted, certainly it is fitting for all Christians. Condemning the preachers who want to censor Calvinism, Spurgeon said: "There has sprung up in the Church of Christ an idea that there are many things taught in the Bible which are not essential . . . that provided we are right in the fundamentals, the other things are of no concern. . . . It becomes an awful thing . . . for men to leave a single mandate unstudied, lest we shall lead others astray, while we ourselves are acting in disobedience to God. . . ."²⁰ Spurgeon said: "It were better for me that I had never been born than that I preach to these people carelessly, or keep back any part of my Master's truth. Better to have been a devil than a preacher playing fast and loose with God's Word, and by such means working ruin of the souls of men. . . . It will be the height of my ambition to be clear of the blood of all men."²¹ He was, of course, referring to *Acts 20:26-27*, where Paul, in a farewell address to the Ephesian elders, says he was cleared of the blood of all men because he has not kept back any doctrines in his evangelism and preaching. Those who avoid the doctrines of predestination and the

¹⁷ Murray, 84.

¹⁸ Murray, 87, quoting from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 3.

¹⁹ *The Early Years*, 168.

²⁰ Murray, 56, quoting from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 6.

²¹ Murray, 39, quoting from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vols. 19 & 27.

inability of man's will, and who censor others from teaching them, have blood on their hands.

Separation, Not Schism

Did Paul not condemn following any human system? Is Calvinism not a divisive human system in the order of the Corinthian slogans, "I follow Paul" or "I follow Apollos"? Well, if Calvinism were indeed merely a human system, then there might be some merit to the charge of being divisive. But Calvinism, as we have seen already, is not a human system.

Truth is by nature controversial. Jesus says he came not to bring peace, but a sword. Jesus and his disciples were not persecuted because they were non-controversial. Spurgeon saw as much. He declared, "Controversy for the truth against the errors of the age is, we feel more than ever convinced, the peculiar duty of the preacher."²² Therefore he was not at all surprised by the enmity toward his proclamation of Calvinism, or the doctrines of grace, as he sometimes called it. The reason, he said, is this: "The fact that conversion and salvation are of God is an humbling truth. It is because of its humbling character that men do not like it."²³ And because they do not like it, they controvert it.

As for unity, Spurgeon said, "I am quite sure that the best way to promote union is to promote truth. It will not do for us to be all united together by yielding to one another's mistakes."²⁴ Spurgeon said something that would not sit well with modern day churches: "I glory in that which at the present day is so much spoken against—sectarianism. . . . Success to sectarianism; let it live and flourish. . . . When we cease, each of us, to maintain our own views of truth, and maintain those views firmly and strenuously, then truth shall fly out of the land, and error alone shall reign."²⁵ What Spurgeon meant was that once debates are censored and hushed up,

error alone will reign. But if everyone would maintain their views of truth strenuously, there will be debates, and truth will always triumph in any conflict. Error thrives in the environment of "No controversy" and "Don't talk about it."

Spurgeon eventually broke away from the Baptist Union at the height of the Down-Grade Controversy, October 28, 1887. Murray says, "The Union was preferring denominational peace to the duty of dealing with error and thus, by tolerating sin, they made the withdrawal of Christians unavoidable."²⁶ False rumors and "What is said of us is nothing; but shall truth be sold to keep up a wider fellowship?" "Long ago I ceased to count heads; truth is usually in the minority." As for disunity, Spurgeon, in his magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*, 1888, wrote, "As to a breach of unity, nothing has ever more largely promoted the union of the true than the break with the false." In another article titled "Separation, not Schism," Spurgeon wrote, "Separation . . . is not schism, but only what truth, conscience, and God require of all who would be found faithful."

No Compromise

Spurgeon withdrew from the Baptist Union precisely because he would never compromise the truth. The Down-Grade Controversy was not about Calvinism in particular, but about the equivocation of terms. This naturally brought in Calvinism, since Calvinism insists on precise definition of terms. Spurgeon wrote of the Baptist Council, "Whatever the Council does, let it above all things avoid the use of language which could legitimately have two meanings contrary to each other. Let us be plain and outspoken. . . . Right is safe, and compromise by the use of double meanings can never in the long run be wise."²⁷

One example of equivocation is on the doctrine of justification by faith. Spurgeon charged Arminianism of leading to legalism by their doctrine of free will. He said, "Do you not see that

²² Murray, 13.

²³ Murray, 60, quoting from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 6.

²⁴ Murray, 65, quoting from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 6.

²⁵ Murray, 66.

²⁶ Murray, 144.

²⁷ Murray, 147, quoting from *The Sword and the Trowel*, 1888.

this is legality—that this is hanging our salvation upon our work—that this is making our eternal life to depend on something we do? Nay, the doctrine of *justification* itself, as preached by the Arminians, is nothing but the doctrine of salvation by works, after all; for he always thinks faith is a work of the creature, and a condition of acceptance. It is as false to say that man is saved by faith as a work, as that he is saved by the deeds of the Law. We are saved by faith as the gift of God. . . ."²⁸ To Spurgeon, to equivocate is to compromise. To agree to ambiguous terms is to compromise. Therefore, he made a stand and broke away. Of the one who compromises, Spurgeon said, "[H]e has, in truth, gone over to the enemy."²⁹ Like the weeping prophet Spurgeon prophesied, "We are going down hill at breakneck speed." And like a voice calling in the wilderness, Spurgeon cried and warned: "Let all who love the Lord, and hate evil, come out of this more and more apostatising church, lest they be partakers of the plague which will come upon her in the day of her visitation."³⁰

Conclusion

The Calvinism of Spurgeon brought him nothing but success in his evangelism, seeing his congregation grew from less than twenty to over six thousand. At the same time, it brought him nothing but controversy. Slanders and false reports dogged him all his life long. Through it all Spurgeon never gave way. He stood his ground despite suffering the mental agony from theological antagonism, which was, no doubt, aggravated by physical pain from his chronic illness of gout. To those who are going through the same struggles, Spurgeon gives his consolation: "We need not be ashamed of our pedigree, although Calvinists are now considered to be heterodox." The situation is the same today, if not worse, as in Spurgeon's day. Calvinism is labeled as "extreme," and worse, "heterodox," while the real heresy, Arminianism, is hailed as orthodoxy. In Spurgeon's bedroom, Mrs. Spurgeon

hung the text, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in Heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (*Matthew* 5:11-12). It is an indication of how pressed Spurgeon was from all sides to have to be constantly reminded by that verse every night before he went to bed. He was faithful to the Gospel until death.

Let all who would be true to the Gospel declare with Charles Haddon Spurgeon:

If all men that live or ever shall live should throw up the old Calvinism, there remains one that will hold it, for the reason—that he could not hold any other. I must be crushed out of existence before my convictions of the truth of the doctrines of grace in the old-fashioned form can ever be taken from me.³¹

²⁸ Murray, 81, quoting from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 9.

²⁹ Murray, 161-162.

³⁰ Murray, 133, quoting from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 15.

³¹ Murray, 168, quoting from *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 30.