

Spurgeonism:
*A Middle Ground between
Calvinism and Anti-Calvinism in the SBC*
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Over 30 years ago, the moderate theologian Roger Olson predicted, “If the fundamentalists ever regain control of the SBC, they will eventually turn on themselves.” Fundamentalists have reclaimed the SBC and are fulfilling Olson’s prediction. One of the most divisive disputes in the SBC is the debate concerning Calvinism. This quarrel has the potential to draw followers of Christ into one of two opposite but equally heretical positions—fatalism or open theism.

C. S. Lewis warned, the devil “*sends errors into the world in pairs—pairs of opposites. . . He relies on your extra dislike of one to draw you gradually into the opposite one. But do not let us be fooled. We have to keep our eyes on the goal and go straight through between both errors.*”¹

In other words, we must handle the Calvinism conflict with assiduous accuracy, surgical precision, and gracious truthfulness. Since the crux of the debate is the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, mollifying this conflict requires a theological authority respected by members on both sides of this issue. Once such respected authority is Charles H. Spurgeon.

While most in the SBC recognize Charles H. Spurgeon as one the greatest preachers and evangelists in history, relatively few recognize Spurgeon’s genius in reconciling Christians regarding this debate. In his book “*A Defense of Calvinism*” Spurgeon wrote, “*I do not think I differ from any of my Hyper-Calvinistic brethren in what I do believe, but I differ from them in what they do not believe. I do not hold any less than they do, but I hold a little more, and, I think, a little more of the truth revealed in the Scriptures.*”² In short, Spurgeon seems to have maintained 1) that God is in control (sovereign) and 2) that humans are free (or responsible). He explained,

I see, in one place, God in providence presiding over all, and yet I see, and I cannot help seeing, that man acts as he pleases, and that God has left his actions, in a great measure, to his own free-will. Now, if I were to declare that man was so free to act that there was no control of God over his actions, I should be driven very near to atheism; and if, on the other hand, I should declare that God so over-rules all things that man is not free enough to be responsible, I should be driven at once into Antinomianism or fatalism. That God predestines, and yet that man is responsible, are two facts that few can see clearly. They are believed to be inconsistent and contradictory to each other. If, then, I find taught in one part of the Bible that everything is fore-ordained, that is true; and if I find, in another Scripture, that man is responsible for all his actions, that is true; and it is only my folly that leads me to imagine that these two truths can ever contradict each other. I do not believe they can ever be welded into one upon any earthly anvil, but they certainly shall be one in eternity. They are two lines that are so nearly parallel, that the human mind which pursues them farthest will never discover that they converge, but they do converge, and they will meet somewhere in eternity, close to the throne of God, whence all truth doth spring.”³

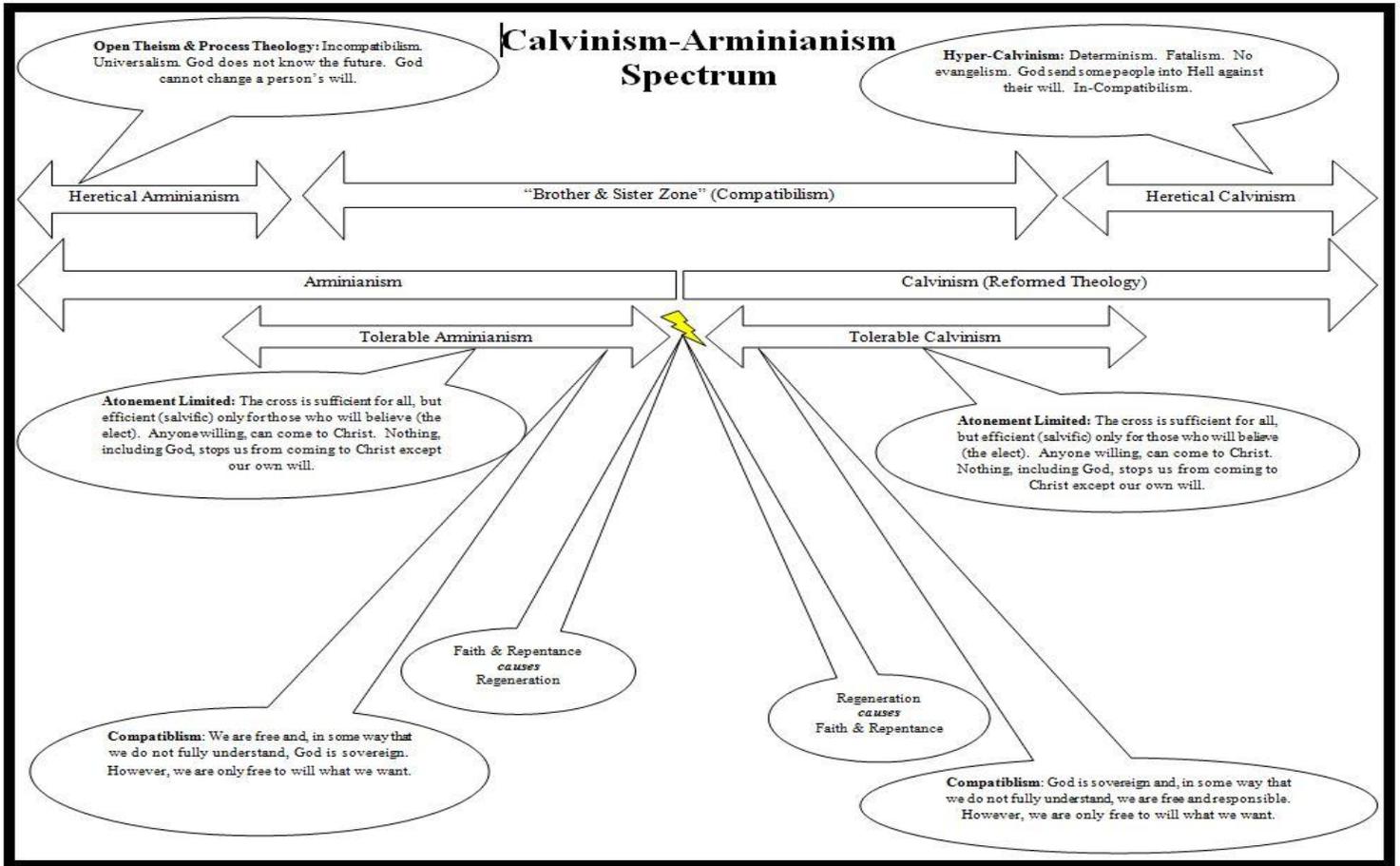
In short, since Spurgeon believed in God’s sovereignty as well as human responsibility (free will) we could call his position “compatibilism” or “Spurgeonism.” In my experience, most of those in the SBC waiving the Calvinism banner are much closer to Spurgeonism than what is often understood as Calvinism. For instance, the majority of these “reformed” theologians maintain that Christ’s atonement was sufficient for all, yet efficient only for the elect (all those who will trust in Jesus). In other words, Christ’s death was so valuable that it could pay for everyone’s sin, even though it is only efficient (saving) for those who place their trust in Jesus—the elect.

¹Mere Christianity, 186.

²A Defense of Calvinism, 20.

³A Defense of Calvinism.

One of the dangers of the Calvinism controversy involves an “either-or” fallacy. For instance, a person is either a Calvinist or non-Calvinist (Arminian). Such labels are, at best, misleading. It is far more helpful to place the one’s position in the debate on spectrum—with hyper-Arminianism (open theism & process theology) on one end, and hyper-Calvinism (fatalism & determinism) on the other. Most Bible-believing, Gospel-preaching Christians fall somewhere between these heretical extremes. The following diagram illustrates this spectrum.



In short, while the order of regeneration is the dividing line between the two camps, those of us who fall within “the brother and sister” zone ought to exercise Christian grace toward each other. In other words, we must agree to disagree over the dynamics of how God saves, and spend more time sharing, preaching, defending, and living-out the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, although my theological position concerning this issue is comparable to Spurgeon’s, my attitude toward the issue closer to Charles Simeon’s. For instance, in a conversation with Jonathan Wesley, Simeon stated, “*Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions. Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?*”⁴ Wesley responded, “*Yes, I do indeed.*” Simeon inquired, “*And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?*” Wesley replied, “*Yes, solely through Christ.*” Simeon asked, “*But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?*” Wesley answered, “*No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last.*” Simeon probed, “*Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?*” Wesley declared, “*No.*” Simeon inquired, “*What then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother’s arms?*” Wesley retorted, “*Yes, altogether.*” Simeon asked, “*And is all your hope in*

⁴Handley Carr Glyn Moule’s 1892 biography, *Charles Simeon*, 79.

the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?” Wesley confessed, “Yes, I have no hope but in Him.” Simeon concluded, “Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it; and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things where in we agree.”

In short, rather than seeking out terms of disagreement, Wesley and Simeon agreed to cease combat and work together to accomplish the things upon which they agreed—namely the great commission and the great commandment. I feel that Christians ought to follow the example of Wesley and Simeon.

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