

Spurgeon and the Downgrade Controversy

by Paul Mizzi

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The Baptist preacher C.H. Spurgeon and his involvement in the controversy against liberalism known as the "Downgrade."

Major issues of the "Downgrade Controversy"

The appeal to "earnestly contend for the faith once delivered unto the saints" was heroically obeyed by Spurgeon. Though he hated controversy for its own sake, yet he accounted it his duty to resist a palpable trend within evangelicalism (and particularly within the Baptist Union) that regressed from conservative Christian truth.

As Spurgeon assessed the steady rise of Higher Criticism within the Protestant Churches, he reluctantly had to speak up in defence of the Faith. How did the state of things come about, and what were the major issues in the Controversy? During the nineteenth century many advances in science, philosophy, languages and history were registered. It could be said that another Renaissance was taking place; a new concern for accuracy and progress was voiced by many.

However, in this effort to advance, established Christian dogma began to be openly questioned and even denied; old sources were critically examined; what was traditionally accepted was brought under examination. Within evangelicalism, it was reasoned that if in other spheres advances were possible, then why not within the church? Why should our spiritual knowledge remain static?

Those who raised the banner of so-called progress were willing to adopt a less rigid and less uncritical attitude to the contents of Scripture. There was in the Baptist Union, of which Spurgeon was a member, a growing shift of emphasis, by several of its leaders, away from the old gospel.

This is not surprising, since it was the time during which the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution, as propounded in his book *The Origin of Species*, was being felt all around. Besides, Great Britain was witnessing an influx of Germany's higher criticism, casting doubt on the integrity and reliability of Holy Scripture. Many preachers were being led astray into idle and vain speculation...in the name of progress.

Though many doctrines came to be questioned, such as eternal punishment and the deity of Christ, the major issue above all else was the inspiration and absolute reliability of Scripture. The Scripture, as the inert Word of the undying God, as the sole rule of faith and practice, was being undermined. The Controversy took its name from the fact that true scriptural theology, the Protestant Faith as shaped by and embedded in Scripture, was on the 'downgrade.'

The main combatants

As a lover of God and His truth, Spurgeon could not remain silent. When he became aware of this situation he was forced to taken public action. He began by writing to the Baptist Union and requested that it should adopt an evangelical statement of faith. Till then, the only condition for membership in the Union was that one believes in adult baptism by immersion. Spurgeon realized how minimal this was in the face of the attacks that were being made upon the Gospel.

His request was all the more important because no disciplinary action was being taken against those who undermined Bible truth. Colenso, Bishop of Natal, was deposed in South Africa in 1862 for impugning the authenticity of the Pentateuch. However on his return to England the validity of his deposition was not upheld. Spurgeon wrote: "God's Word, in this age, is a small affair; some do not even believe it to be inspired; and those who profess to revere it set up other books in a sort of rivalry with it. Why, there are great Church dignitaries now-a-days who write against the Bible, and yet find bishops to defend them."

The New School of Theology had many supporters. It was dominant in Congregationalism. R.W. Dale had declared openly against the eternal punishment of the wicked. He opted for the theory of annihilation. To add insult to injury, he took the stand that a doctrinal acceptance of the deity of Christ was not a sine qua non for saving faith. Christ is not lost to us, he claimed, if we discard the old belief in the inerrancy of Scripture. Dale was so brazen-faced that he declared to a group of ministers: "There is now no authority to come between us - to come between the congregation to which you and I have to minister, and Him who is the very truth of God."

R.F. Horton and Alexander MacKenna were Dale's supporters. They cunningly distinguished between dogma as a final statement, and doctrine which was something always progressing. While we should retain doctrine (because it is pliable by men), we should reject dogma, they claimed. One of the dogmas Horton rejected, in the name of "progressive" views, was the inspiration of the Bible.

Spurgeon would have none of this. Should the Bible be surrendered to the whims of mere men, then the Faith becomes so dangerously subjective. He wrote: "It now becomes a serious question how far those who abide by the faith once delivered to the saints should fraternize with those who have turned aside to another gospel. Christian love has its claims, and divisions are to be shunned as grievous evils; but how far are we justified in being in confederacy with those who are departing from the truth?" For Spurgeon the situation was critical: the truth was under fire and in his assessment the opponents had turned to "another gospel."

After doing his utmost to warn and appeal those in authority within the Baptist Union, especially its secretary S.H. Booth, Spurgeon withdrew from it on October 28th, 1887. His reason was that 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.

His stand was unshakeable. In *The Sword and the Trowel*, he expressed it clearly: "Believers in Christ's atonement are now in declared union with those who make light of it; believers in Holy Scripture are in confederacy with those who deny plenary inspiration; those who hold evangelical doctrine are in open alliance with those who call the fall a fable, who deny the personality of the Holy Ghost, who call justification by faith immoral, and hold that there is another probation after death...It is our solemn conviction that there should be no pretence of fellowship. Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin" (emphasis in the original).

Later he wrote: "I would like all Christendom to know that all I asked of the Union is that it be formed on a Scriptural basis."

Applied lessons from the Controversy

Controversy is never pleasant in itself, but as in every other battle that the church is called to fight, "there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you" (1 Corinthians 11:19). The prime lesson to be taken to heart by every believer is to be ready to stand in the breach and not be intimidated by the onslaught of the enemy. Though the world fall, yet the Christian is to proclaim and defend the Faith. Spurgeon's health suffered because of his engagement in the Controversy, and yet he would not keep silent. "I believed, and therefore have I spoken" (2 Corinthians 4:13). And the more gifted we are the more urgent becomes the call to take our place on the front. Spurgeon saw this and faithfully obeyed.

Though comparatively few sided with Spurgeon, yet he would not be deterred. Truth must be vindicated...and history has now vindicated Truth's Defender. We Christians today are appreciative of his boldness to withstand the evil tide. Are we then not called to do the same, that is, to engage the enemy and forego comfort and respectability?

In the heat of the battle, Spurgeon made comment that is worthwhile considering. "Whether it be the Baptist Church, or the Episcopalian, or the Presbyterian Church which errs from Christ's way, it is nothing to any one of us which it may be; it is Christ we are to care for, and Christ's truth, and this we are to follow over all the hedges and ditches of men's making." Spurgeon was magnanimous enough to see that even though he had to disassociate himself from his own denomination, he would do it if the truth so demanded. Many times we ourselves are found defending our own denomination, warts and all, and do not stop to consider that our own denomination might be in error after all.

Again, Spurgeon was not ready “to subordinate the maintenance of truth to denominational prosperity and unity.” Truth is more essential than unity, for true biblical unity (that pleases God) is always around His Truth. Unity is not a group of people under one roof; it is a group of people holding fast and confessing the same Truth. Unity becomes visible when Christians believe and obey the same Word of God. A relevant lesson for us today!

As Spurgeon lifted the standard high, the vast majority were content to maintain the status quo. If they happened to be in the Baptist Union, they would not pull out, even though they saw the evil therein. And the factor which retained the multitude in the Union which Spurgeon rightly left was that most Baptists of his day regarded a national organisation of their churches as essential to their well-being. Missions and many other activities were channeled through the Union; how could a Baptist church survive outside the Union? This was the question in the minds of many, but Spurgeon was convinced that faithfulness to God (even though it practically meant less affectivity and perhaps a slower rate of “success”) was more important than “surviving.”

Being a member in a big organisation which promises safety and recognition is not a guarantee of maintaining a distinctively Christian character. To remain “big,” an organisation has to be ready to reduce what constitutes the content of orthodox Christianity to a minimum, and also adopt a “love” which made men unwilling to question the standing of any denomination in the sight of God. Spurgeon was ready (though he had hoped for the best) to stand up and be counted (all alone) rather than being lost in a morass of unbelief.

Spurgeon himself gives us the options, from which, upon due reflection we may learn in our generation. He wrote: “For Christians to be linked in association with ministers who do not preach the gospel of Christ is to incur guilt.

“A Union which can continue irrespective of whether its member churches belong to a common faith is not fulfilling any scriptural function.

“The preservation of a denominational association when it is powerless to discipline heretics cannot be justified on the grounds of the preservation of ‘Christian unity’.

“It is error which breaks the unity of churches, and to remain in a denominational alignment which condones error is to support schism.”

For all appearances Spurgeon committed an act of schism when he pulled out of the Baptist Union. But in reality it was those who remained within the Union, unrepentant of their unbelief, who were guilty. One of Spurgeon’s articles, entitled, “Separation not Schism,” elucidates the point, missed by many today: “Separation from such as connive at fundamental error, or withhold the ‘Bread of Life’ from perishing souls, is not schism, but only what truth, and conscience, and God require of all who would be found faithful.”

The Downgrade teaches us to beware of pragmatism too. Iain Murray explains that it “showed a readiness on the part of many ministers to justify their lack of firm action on the grounds of the greater good to be gained by a more accommodating policy. This was the attitude of those who sympathised with Spurgeon’s concern, but regretted his withdrawal as they balanced it over against the influence he might have exerted had he stayed in the Union” (The Forgotten Spurgeon, p. 160). But Spurgeon retorted to their moral laziness by asking, “What have you and I to do with maintaining our influence and position at the expense of truth? It is never right to do a little wrong to obtain the greatest possible good....Your duty is to do the right: consequences are with God” (ibid., p.161). How profoundly true....and yet how prone we are to fall into that very temptation!

Using hindsight and evaluating the course of the Controversy, we realise how heroic Spurgeon was, how he was guided by wisdom from above rather than being dictated to by worldly philosophy. How we need to take heed of his advice: “If an act of sin would increase my usefulness tenfold, I have no right to do it; and if an act of righteousness would appear like to destroy all my apparent usefulness, I am yet to do it. It is yours and mine to do the right though the heavens fall, and follow the command of Christ whatever the consequences may be” (ibid., p.162). Like Spurgeon we are bound to avoid Jesuitical sophistry that dishonours God.

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