

The Down Grade Controversy and Evangelical Boundaries: Some Lessons from Spurgeon's Battle for Evangelical Orthodoxy

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*Introduction*¹

The very nature of the quest at hand, “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries,”² indicates that there exists a level of discomfort or dissatisfaction with the previously established norms and definitions. The idea of Evangelicalism being a movement that “emphasizes conformity to the basic tenets of the faith and a missionary outreach of compassion and urgency;”³ holding to a theological position which “begins with a stress on the sovereignty of God;”⁴ regarding Scripture as the “divinely inspired record of God’s revelation, the infallible, authoritative guide for faith and practice;”⁵ or, in short, that Evangelicalism is “the affirmation of the central beliefs of historic Christianity,”⁶ is no longer a settled matter; or perhaps,

¹ This article was originally read as a paper at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 2001 at Colorado Springs, Colorado.

² The theme of the 2001 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society.

³ Pierard, Richard V., “Evangelicalism” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, editor (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), 379.

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 380.

more disturbingly, those items which constitute the “central beliefs of historic Christianity” is no longer a settled matter.

In the new edition of the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, the article on “Evangelicalism” has been revised and expanded to reflect this discomfort. The authors state, “The very nature of Evangelicalism never was a unified movement but a collection of emphases based on a common core of belief—a core that itself is now under discussion.”⁷ The revised article summarizes six points of discussion within 21st century Evangelicalism:

First, the nature of God. Some reformists would like to abandon a traditional theism for a more process model of God or would redefine various of God’s attributes, in particular God’s omniscience, arguing that for humans to be truly free, God cannot know the future. Second, Christology. In order to preserve the true humanity of Jesus, some reformists are advocating an adoptionist or kenotic form of Christology. They argue that evangelicalism is in danger of becoming docetic by placing too much emphasis on the deity of Christ. Third, the doctrine of salvation. The theory of the atonement is now being revisited, and various forms of universalism are being openly defended as evangelical. This denies the doctrine of hell, as do annihilationist theories, which are also being broached within the evangelical community. Fourth, the doctrine of Scripture. Reformists are dissatisfied with the traditional doctrine of inerrancy and would substitute, “infallibility” (Scripture infallibly leads us to Christ), “final authority in what it teaches” (but nowhere else), or “final authority in faith and doctrine (but not necessarily in matters of science or history). Fifth, the traditional doctrine of direct creation (not necessarily twenty-four hours day theories) is being replaced by theistic evolution. Sixth, the area of hermeneutics, postmodern literary theories are being used to deny that we may know to any truly meaningful extent the original author’s intent when reading the Scriptures.⁸

That American Evangelicalism in the beginning of the 21st century would be struggling with its “core of beliefs” is a theme reminiscent of Thomas A. Langford’s work: *In Search of Foundations, English Theology 1900-1920*.⁹ Given the dominance of Protestant, Puritan and Evangelical theology in both Anglican and Non-Conforming churches in the pre-

⁷ Pierard, Richard V. and Walter A. Elwell, “Evangelicalism” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2001), p. 409

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Langford, Thomas A. *In Search of Foundations: English Theology 1900-1920*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Abington Press, 1969).

ceding 300 years seems, the title, at first blush, somewhat ludicrous. The idea that theological “foundations” were in need of “finding” at the beginning of the 20th century is strikingly peculiar.

However, by the turn of the century, the moorings of English evangelical theology had been severely damaged, and the foundation, if not lost, was certainly obscured. This situation was exemplified, in no small part, by the Down Grade Controversy (1887-92)¹⁰ in England between the hierarchy of the Baptist Union and the most influential Baptist pastor, educator and theologian of the Victorian era, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92).

It may seem as though there would be no connection between the theological debates in 21st century American Evangelicalism and a 19th century British Baptist controversy. Even as late as 1958 Glover stated of the Down Grade Controversy that it is “from the perspective of the mid-twentieth century . . . hardly more than an insignificant episode in the history of English Baptists.”¹¹ However, in more recent years the controversy has increasingly served as a model for engaging the theological issues of the present day.¹² Carlile, more accurately, called the Down Grade “one of those conflicts which reappear in history when opposing ideas can long longer refuse battle.”¹³ MacArthur sees, “striking parallels

¹⁰ The phrase “Down Grade” is rendered in various manners in the literature. For our purposes we have chosen the form that Spurgeon adopted in his writings. Quotations from others in this paper will naturally reflect that author’s form.

¹¹ Booth, Willis B. “English Baptists at the Time of the Downgrade Controversy,” *Foundations: A Baptist Journal of History and Theology*. 1:3 (July 1958), 46.

¹² For examples see: John F. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1993), Thomas Jerrell Sutton, “A Comparison Between the Down Grade Controversy and Tensions Over Biblical Inerrancy in the Southern Baptist Convention,” Unpublished doctoral dissertation (Fort Worth, Texas: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982), and R. J. Sheehan, *C. H. Spurgeon and the Modern Church: Lessons for Today from the Downgrade Controversy*. (London: Grace Publications, 1985).

¹³ Carlile, J. C. *C. H. Spurgeon: An Interpretive Biography*. (London: The Religious Tract Society and the Kingsgate Press, 1933), p. 243.

between what is happening in the church today and what happened a hundred years ago.”¹⁴

He notes, “The more I read about that era, the more my conviction is reinforced that we are seeing history repeat itself.”¹⁵

This article will strive to examine the issues related to the Down Grade Controversy and compare those to the larger issue of the boundaries of American Evangelicalism today.

The Background of the Down Grade

The Down Grade Controversy was a prolonged dispute between Spurgeon and the leaders of the Baptist Union about various manifestations of what was called the “New Theology” arising in the Union. The dispute ultimately led to Spurgeon’s withdrawal from the Union and the Union’s subsequent vote of censure against Spurgeon; the dispute ending with Spurgeon’s death early in 1892.

The prelude to the controversy had really begun in the preceding decade. Kingdom notes that “the Down Grade controversy broke out in a period of theological decline”¹⁶ within an organization which was comprised of a “complex and confused ecclesiastical situation.”¹⁷ The Baptist Union, founded in 1813, was originally a voluntary association of Particular or Calvinistic Baptist Churches.¹⁸ The Union was reorganized in 1832 describing it-

¹⁴ MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, p. xix.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Kingdom, David P. “C. H. Spurgeon and the Down Grade Controversy,” in *The Good Fight of Faith, 1971 Westminster Conference Papers*. (London: Westminster Chapel, 1971), 35. This article was also republished in an edited form in *A Marvelous Ministry: How the All-round Ministry of Charles Haddon Spurgeon Speaks to Us Today*, by Tim Curnow, Erroll Hulse, David Kingdom and Geoff Thomas (Ligonier, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publishers, 1993).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁸ Payne, Ernest A., *The Baptist Union: A Short History*. (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Ltd., 1958), p. 1. Actually the name “Baptist Union” was the common name for the organization that was not made official until 1873.

self as a “union of Baptist ministers and churches who agree in the sentiments usually denominated evangelical.”¹⁹ This rather nebulous statement allowed for members of the New Connexion of General Baptists, the newly formed association of evangelical Arminian Baptists, to gain entry into and association with the Union. At that time Payne notes “the defenders of both traditions felt themselves at one in an understandings of the Christian faith which was ‘evangelical.’”²⁰ However, this one mind lasted less than a generation. In 1873 the Union again discussed the basis of fellowship and discovered it could no longer agree on the word “evangelical.” Many expressed the idea that it was too limiting in terms of “intellectual freedom,” the “autonomy and independence” of the local churches, and the “right of the individual to his own private judgment.”²¹ The Union adopted a statement of purpose that required only agreement that “immersion of believers is the only Christian baptism”²² as being necessary for inclusion in the Union fellowship.

It was at this point that Spurgeon, who had long supported the Union, began to raise objections. The inroads of evolutionary thought and higher criticism were beginning to have an impact on British evangelical theology. At the 1873 meeting he argued that, “it was no time to be changing moorings”²³ and for the first time proposed that the Union adopt a more substantial doctrinal declaration based on the model of the Evangelical Alliance. The Alliance, formed in 1846 by Anglican and non-conformist ministers, had also been supported by Spurgeon. However, the Union leadership rejected this as an unnecessary abandonment of what was viewed as the traditional Baptist policy against creedal statements.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Kingdom, p. 40.

This inaction by the Baptist Union proved to be a significant decision and a watershed event for the controversy to follow. Leland points out that the entire Down Grade controversy likely would have been avoided had the Union adopted “an explicitly authoritative creed”²⁴ or even the “evangelical declaration” favored by Spurgeon.²⁵ He also adds that among the main reasons for rejecting the adoption of a formal statement was “an aversion to dogmatism or what might be called a sense of ‘theological elasticity.’”²⁶ By 1891 the *de facto* unification of the Baptist Union and the New Connexion of General Baptists became *de jure*.

Several other important developments precipitated the Down Grade Controversy. The first was the 1877 publication, by Samuel Cox, the influential pastor of Mansfield Road Baptist Church in Nottingham and founding editor of *The Expositor*, of the book *Salvator Mundi; of Is Christ the Savior of All Men?*. In this work Cox articulated his views regarding the “larger hope” in salvation which rejected eternal punishment, advocated universalism and what Spurgeon called “post-mortem salvation.”²⁷ Cox also was the president of the New Connexion of General Baptists in 1873 and published a sequel to *Salvator Mundi*, entitled, *The Larger Hope*²⁸ in 1883 just as the Down Grade Controversy was about to begin in earnest.

Another significant event was the address of John Page-Hopps at the annual meeting of the Baptist Union in 1883. Page-Hopps was a Unitarian who had graduated from the New

²⁴ Leland, Patrick R. “Anti-Creedalism in the Down Grade Controversy,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 31 (April 1996), p. 33-34.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 34

²⁷ Underwood, A. C. *A History of the English Baptists*. (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Ltd., 1947), p. 230, n.1. Largely because of his increasingly liberal theological views 1884 Cox was replaced by the publishers, Hodder and Stoughton, with W. Robertson Nicoll. However, as many have noted, under Nicoll’s editorship, *The Expositor* became the leading Evangelical outlet for High Criticism.

²⁸ Cox’s works remain some of the most influential literature in universalist circles. *Salvator Mundi* has gone through nearly 20 printings since it first appeared.

Connexion General Baptist College in Leicester. His remarks were apparently injudicious and offended a number present.²⁹ While Spurgeon himself was not in attendance at the meeting the meeting and the contents of the speech was reported to him by his friend and member of the Baptist Union council, Archibald Brown.³⁰ At this time Spurgeon apparently decided that he could no longer associate with the Baptist Union and planned to withdraw, writing a letter to his brother-in-law, William Jackson to that effect.³¹ Word of this impending defection spread to members of the Baptist Union Council who met with Spurgeon and pleaded with him to stay. During the Down Grade Controversy itself Spurgeon retells this incident in a letter to the editor of *The Baptist* magazine dated December 19, 1887:

After a painful occurrence at Leicester I made serious complaint to the secretary, the president (Mr. Chown), and others of the Council. At the Orphanage to which he kindly came, Mr. Chown made to me a pathetic appeal to regard it as a solitary incident and hoping that I had been mistaken. I did not go further with this matter, for which, possibly, I am blameworthy.³²

The other major occurrence involved the general secretary of the Baptist Union during the controversy, Samuel Harris Booth. Booth and Spurgeon had been friends for some time and corresponded with some regularity.³³ Along with his duties with the Baptist union, Booth was also pastor of Elm Road Church in Beckenham. Because of the burden of his responsibilities and associate pastor was secured to assist Booth, W. E. Bloomfield, a graduate of Regent's Park College. After a short time Booth became unhappy with the doctrinal content of Bloomfield's sermons and dismissed him. However, the church membership sup-

²⁹ Kingdom, p. 41.

³⁰ Drummond, Lewis A. *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1992), 667.

³¹ Ibid. The letter was dated November 8, 1883 and states in part, "I think I must personally withdraw from the Baptist Union."

³² Cited in *The Life and Work of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* by G. Holden Pike. (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1894), 6:292

³³ Payne, *History*, p. 130.

ported Bloomfield and, after a board of inquiry by three sympathetic pastors concluded that Bloomfield was doctrinally sound, he was re-instated by the membership. Booth resigned from the church in 1885.³⁴ In his resignation letter stated:

...we stand against the attempt to bring into our churches what is known as the "New Theology" which teaches that such phrases as the Atonement, the Church or The Fall are only mental conceptions and not actual facts. As opposed to such nebulous theology, I have preached not about Christ, but Christ Himself.³⁵

Spurgeon and Booth corresponded and met on at least a few occasions to discuss this matter³⁶. Drummond states:

Booth not only informed Spurgeon of the Elm Road situation with Bloomfield, but also told him of other serious theological problems throughout the entire Union. Booth apparently pleaded with Spurgeon to take a stand . . . it seems to be the case that Booth gave Spurgeon facts and names concerning what he considered as heretical doctrine preached by those who were deviating from orthodox Christianity.³⁷

The Down Grade Controversy certainly did not occur in a vacuum; and, in many respects, the fact of the controversy should not have really been all that surprising. Kingdom points out:

That in 1887 he [Spurgeon] should have raised his voice in public protest at doctrinal declension within the ranks should not have surprised those who were in the inner councils of the Union. That Spurgeon was made to appear by the officials and Council of the Union to have made sudden and unsubstantiated charges is a sad reflection upon their integrity.³⁸

Graham Harrison, echoes this sentiment, "It really is amazing that the charges Spurgeon was to raise in the Down-grade Controversy could ever have been queried as being unfounded."³⁹

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Cited in Drummond, *Prince of Preachers*, p. 670.

³⁶ Payne, *History*, p. 129-30.

³⁷ Drummond, *Prince of Preachers*, p. 670-71.

³⁸ Kingdom, "Down Grade Controversy", p. 42.

³⁹ Harrison, Graham. "C. H. Spurgeon and the Downgrade Controversy," in *Divisions and Dissensions The Westminster Conference Papers, 1987*. (London: Westminster Chapel, 1987), 98.

Even Willis B. Glover, no friend of conservative theology himself, stated that, “we can see that Spurgeon’s apprehensions were not without foundation.”⁴⁰

Not only should the controversy not surprised the council; Samuel Harris Booth, the general secretary of the Union, it seems, should have welcomed it. In 1887 Spurgeon would begin the formal battle for theological orthodoxy in the Baptist Union.

The Events of the Down Grade

The Down Grade Controversy began with the publication of two articles in Spurgeon’s widely distributed monthly journal, *The Sword and Trowel* in 1887.⁴¹ The articles were without by-line; however, they were the product of Spurgeon’s close friend Robert Shindler.⁴² Spurgeon inserted a footnote on the first page of each of the “Down Grade” articles where he called for “earnest attention” on the part of the readers,⁴³ with the urgent warning that “we are going down hill at break-neck speed.”⁴⁴ Spurgeon himself later added several additional articles and regular notes in *The Sword and Trowel*.

In the first article Shindler layed a historical foundation for his thesis, detailing how many non-conformist churches, immediately after the Puritan era, began to drift into theological error.

⁴⁰ Glover, “English Baptists,” p. 47

⁴¹ It should be remembered that in this era the print media was the exclusive means of disseminating information. The so-called “religious press” was widespread and influential and the secular press reported on religious and ecclesiastical matters on an in-depth basis.

⁴² Drummond, *Prince of Preachers*, p. 676. Drummond states fully:

The articles were unsigned, but it is common knowledge that there were written by Robert Shindler, who later wrote a biography of Spurgeon entitled, *From the Usher’s Desk to the Tabernacle Pulpit*. It may seem strange that Spurgeon did not author these early Down Grade Articles, thus becoming the one who fired the first broadside against heterodoxy, but he no doubt approved them. The author, Robert Shindler, stated that Spurgeon himself supervised the writing of the articles while in Mentone (*ibid*).

⁴³ Shindler, Robert. “The Down Grade,” *The Sword and Trowel* (March 1887), 122.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*.

The Churches they established were all Calvinistic in their faith and such they remained for at least that generation. It is a matter of veritable history, however, that such they did not all continue for any great length of time. Some of them, in the course of two or three generations, or even less, became either Arian or Socinian. This was eventually the case with nearly all the Presbyterians, and later on, with some of the Independents, and with many of the General Baptist Communities. By some means or other, first the ministers and then the Churches, got on “the down grade,” and in some cases the descent was rapid, and in all very disastrous.⁴⁵

The second article continued the discussion of theological Down Grade concentrating on the Baptist churches. His main points were that (1) earlier church leaders, although themselves sound in doctrine, had not been sufficiently bold to confront error;⁴⁶ (2) “The first step astray is a want of adequate faith in the divine inspiration of the sacred Scriptures. All the while a man bows to the authority of God’s Word, he will not entertain any sentiment contrary too its teaching;⁴⁷ and finally (3) a departure from Calvinistic doctrine. On the last point, neither Shindler nor Spurgeon were dogmatic. Shindler stated that, “the writer is of the opinion that the great majority of those who are sound in the doctrine of inspiration, are more or less Calvinistic in doctrine.”⁴⁸ In the same issue Spurgeon added that,

We care 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 vital truth, and therefore we are sorry to see any quitting it who once accepted it.⁴⁹

Spurgeon made it clear that his argument was not designed to reopen the older Calvinist-Arminian debates. “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.”⁵⁰ Throughout the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Shindler, Robert. “The Down Grade Second Article,” *The Sword and Trowel* (April 1887), 166-71. His particular example was that of Philip Doddridge (1702-51), page 166.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 170.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Spurgeon, Charles H. “Notes,” *The Sword and Trowel* (April 1887), 195.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 196.

Down Grade Controversy the charge was made that Spurgeon was motivated by his desire to force conformity within the Union to his Calvinistic theology. Spurgeon steadfastly refuted this charge declaring:

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. . . it is of no use attempting to drag this red herring across our path: we can argue other points and maintain Christian harmony at the same time; but with those who treat the bible as waste paper, and regard the death of Christ as no substitution, we have no desire for fellowship.⁵¹

Shindler added a third article in June 1887 where he turned his attention to American manifestations of the Down Grade, the heresy trials involving members of the faculty at Andover Theological Seminary. He accused them of using deception to gain their positions, affirming doctrines that they could not possibly believe given their public statements and published works.⁵² In summarizing this article MacArthur points out:

Shindler saw the Andover disaster as an object lesson on the dangers of the down-grade, and he did not hesitate to make the points, using American Baptists as an illustration, that The Baptist Union in England was headed down the same path.⁵³

The articles evoked small reaction at first, then Spurgeon himself for five consecutive issues of *The Sword and Trowel* wrote a series of articles under his own name. These would bring the controversy to “white hot temperature.”⁵⁴

In the first article by Spurgeon, “Another Word Concerning the Down-Grade” (August 1887), he left no doubt as to the issues involved and was much more forceful in language than Shindler had been. He stated:

⁵¹ Spurgeon, Charles H., “Notes,” *The Sword and Trowel*, 23 (December 1887), p. 642.

⁵² Shindler, Robert. “Andover Theology,” *The Sword and Trowel* 23 (June 1887), 274-80.

⁵³ MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, p. 204.

⁵⁴ Drummond, *Prince of Preachers*, p. 680.

Read those newspapers which represent the Broad School of Dissent, and ask yourself, How much further could they go? What doctrine remains to be abandoned? What other truth is to be the object of contempt? A new religion has been initiated, which is no more Christianity than chalk is cheese; and this religion being destitute of moral honesty, palms itself off as the old faith with slight improvements, and on this plea usurps pulpits which were erected for gospel preaching. The Atonement is scouted, the inspiration of Scripture is derided, the Holy Spirit is degraded into an influence, the punishment of sin is turned into fiction, and the resurrection into a myth, and yet these enemies of our faith expect us to call them brethren, and maintain a confederacy with them!⁵⁵

In this concept Spurgeon foreshadows the later thesis of J. Gresham Machen, who in *Christianity and Liberalism*, made the point that liberalism was not Christianity at all, but an entirely new religion.⁵⁶ Machen echoed Spurgeon as he said:

. . . it may appear that what the liberal theologian has retained after abandoning to the enemy one Christian doctrine after another is not Christianity at all, but a religion which is so entirely different from Christianity as to be long in a distinct category. It may appear further that the fears of the modern man as to Christianity were entirely ungrounded, and that in abandoning the embattled walls of the city of God he has fled in needless panic into the open plains of a vague natural religion only to fall an easy victim to the enemy who ever lies in ambush there.⁵⁷

Spurgeon had clearly taken the challenge given to him by Booth as he stated, “it is time that somebody should spring his rattle, and call attention to the way in which God is being robbed of his glory, and man of his hope.”⁵⁸ Spurgeon was most certainly concerned about the purity of essential biblical doctrines, but he was equally concerned by what he saw as the immediate and practical result of the “New Theology.” “At the back of doctrinal falsehood comes a natural decline of spiritual life, evidenced by a taste for questionable amusements,

⁵⁵ Spurgeon, Charles H. “Another Word Concerning the Down-Grade.” *The Sword and Trowel* 23 (August 1887), p. 397.

⁵⁶ Machen, J. Gresham. *Christianity and Liberalism*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7

⁵⁸ Spurgeon, ‘Another Word,’ p. 400

and a weariness of devotional meetings.”⁵⁹ Above all he saw the greatest danger in the fact that the gospel was being marginalized, ridiculed and obscured.

Where the gospel is fully and powerfully preached, with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven, our churches not only hold their own, but win converts; but when that which constitutes their strength is gone—we mean when the gospel is concealed, and the life of prayer is slighted—the whole things becomes a mere form and fiction.⁶⁰

Apparently already sensing where this controversy was going to lead him he stated:

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 live 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?”⁶¹

He understood that absolute purity was not realistic, “we fear it is hopeless ever to form a society which can keep out men base enough to profess one things and believe another.”⁶²

Spurgeon firmly declared that the ‘New Theology’ was not Christianity and that there could be no union or cooperation with those who denied doctrines essential for salvation.⁶³

In the second article Spurgeon reacted to those who both opposed his “Down Grade” views and supported his stand. Glover concluded that Spurgeon had “expected that the majority of English Baptists and perhaps other denominations would rally around him in opposition to pernicious influences.”⁶⁴ While that seems unlikely, given the general history leading up to the controversy, he is perhaps correct to state that “Spurgeon had under-estimated

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 397.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 399.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 400.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Wills, Gregory A. “The Ecclesiology of Charles H. Spurgeon: Unity, Orthodoxy and Denominational Identity,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 34:3 (Autumn 1999), p. 75.

⁶⁴ Glover, Willis B. *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century*. (London: Independent Press Ltd., 1954), p. 167.

rather than over-estimated how widespread the heretical taints were. Even the real evangelicals were confused.”⁶⁵ Spurgeon himself stated:

Let no man think that a sudden crotchet has entered our head, and that we have written in hot haste: we have waited long, perhaps too long, and have been slow to speak. Neither let any one suppose that we build our statements upon a few isolated facts, and bring to the front certain regrettable incidents which might as well have been forgotten. He who knows all things can alone reveal the wretched facts which have come under our notice. Their memory will, we trust, die and be buried with the man who has borne their burden, and held his peace because he had no wish to create disunion. Resolved to respect the claims both of truth and love, we have pursued an anxious pathway. To protest when nothing could come of it but anger, has seemed senseless; to assail evil and crush a vast amount of good in the process, has appeared to be injurious. If all knew all, our reticence would be wondered at and we are not sure it would be approved. Whether approved or not, we have had no motive but the general progress of the cause of truth, and the glory of God.⁶⁶

Spurgeon lamented the fact that the issues he was raising were not being honestly addressed; “no one has set himself to disprove our allegations,”⁶⁷ he stated. He was accused of pessimism, vagueness of charges, trying to open old wounds and even unsoundness of mind due to his increasingly poor health.⁶⁸ In the third article in October 1887, “The Case Proved” Spurgeon detailed several examples of the inroads the “New Theology” had made. He also made it clear that he would resign from the Baptist Union. “One thing is clear to us: we cannot be expected to meet in an Union which comprehends those whose teaching is upon fundamental points exactly the reverse of that which we hold dear. . . With deep regret we abstain from assembling with those whom we dearly love and heartily respect, since it would involve us in a confederacy with those with whom we can have no communion in the Lord.”⁶⁹ Spurgeon officially resigned from the Union on October 28, 1887.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 168.

⁶⁶ Spurgeon, Charles H. “Our Reply to Sundry Critics and Enquirers,” *The Sword and Trowel* 23 (September 1887), p. 462.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 461.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 462-63.

⁶⁹ Spurgeon, Charles H. “The Case Proved,” *The Sword and Trowel* 23 (October 1887), p. 515.

Within the third article we are also exposed to the inner workings of the Baptist Union and the now vacillating general secretary Samuel Harris Booth. As previously noted, in 1885 Booth had given Spurgeon information regarding doctrinal defections among members of the Baptist Union and had corresponded with him extensively. As the controversy deepened and the Union council sought a way minimize the damage, members of the council began to criticize Spurgeon for not producing the evidence and names of erring ministers and churches he had claimed to have. At this crucial point Spurgeon informed Booth of his intention to bring to the public eye the information that Booth had provided in the preceding years. Booth, for reasons that have never been fully understood, forbade Spurgeon from doing so, claiming that the correspondence and communication was provided in confidence.⁷⁰ Spurgeon, wisely or not, acted as his own honor required and agreed to Booth's demand. Spurgeon, in a somewhat oblique manner, did make a public pronouncement that he possessed all of the evidence required to prove the reality of the Down Grade. Spurgeon wrote:

If we were not extremely anxious to avoid personalities, we could point to other utterances of some of these esteemed writers which, if they did not contradict what they have now written, would be such a supplement to it that their entire mind would be better known. To break a seal of confidential correspondence, or to reveal private conversations, would not occur to us; but we feel compelled to say that, in one or two cases, the writers have not put into print what we have personally gathered from them on other occasions. Their evident desire to allay the apprehensions of others may have helped them forge their own fears. We say no more.⁷¹

In his important biography of Spurgeon, Carlile states:

Many letters passed between Dr. Booth and Mr. Spurgeon during the period of the controversy, 1887-1892. Some of these letters were well known to myself and others. Dr. Booth gave names, and extracts from sermons and speeches. The correspondence passed at the death of Spurgeon into the hands of his wife, and then to his son, Charles.

⁷⁰ Harrison, "Spurgeon," p. 110; Carlile, "Spurgeon," p. 247

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 510.

And it cannot now be traced. Probably it was destroyed in order to prevent accentuating the unhappy controversy to which it referred.⁷²

Carlile also noted,

Mr. Holden Pike in his *Life of Spurgeon* made several references to Dr. Booth's communications, and Mrs. Spurgeon wrote: "There are many dear and able friends who could write the full history of the controversy, but after much thought and prayer I have been led to allow the shadow of the pastor rest upon it in a measure, and to conceal under a generous silence most of the documentary and other evidence which could be produced to prove the perfect uprightness, veracity and fidelity of my dear husband throughout the whole of the solemn protest which culminated in the vote of censure by the Council of the Baptist Union."⁷³

In the four volume *Autobiography*, edited by Mrs. Spurgeon and J. W. Harrald, Spurgeon's private secretary, only 12 pages are dedicated to the Down Grade Controversy. At the end of the chapter Mrs. Spurgeon again stated,

I have received from many friends copies of my dear husband's letters written during this trying period; but I do not think any good purpose can be served by the publication of more than I have here given. Those who sympathized with him in his protest need nothing to convince them of the need and the wisdom of his action; while those who were opposed to him would probably remain in the same mind, whatever might be said, so there the matter must rest as far as I am concerned.⁷⁴

Booth's integrity and character in this matter is certainly to be called into question,⁷⁵ and subsequent documentary discoveries⁷⁶ demonstrate that he had within his ability to stand for not only doctrinal truth, but also personal integrity; unfortunately he failed to do either. At one point during a meeting of the council Booth was asked directly by other council members whether or not Spurgeon had ever communicated to him charges against other ministers

⁷² Carlile, *C. H. Spurgeon*, p. 246.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁷⁴ Spurgeon, Charles H. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography; Compiled from His Diary, Letters and Records by His Wife and His Private Secretary*. Volume 4 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1900), p. 264.

⁷⁵ Drummond, *Prince of Preachers*, p. 685.

⁷⁶ Hopkins, mark, "The Down Grade Controversy: New Evidence," *The Baptist Quarterly* 35:6 (April 1994), p. 262-78.

or churches. Booth denied that any such communication had ever happened.⁷⁷ James Spurgeon, Charles' brother and himself a prominent member of the Baptist Union, was at the meeting and the recently discovered minutes from that meeting⁷⁸ indicates that this denial and another assertion of a lack of truthfulness on the part of Charles H. Spurgeon so angered him that he left the meeting.⁷⁹ James Spurgeon related the events of this meeting to his brother. Spurgeon, writing to his wife about the meeting stated, "for Dr. Booth to say I never complained, is amazing. God knows all about it, and He will see me righted."⁸⁰

During the extended negotiations⁸¹ where the Council sought to heal this breach and bring Spurgeon back into the assembly two things ended any hope of reconciliation. Spurgeon again requested the Council to adopt a declarative statement of faith based on the model of the Evangelical Alliance. The council refused again indicating that they saw no need. The council pressed Spurgeon to again name specific individuals. By this time Spurgeon saw that nothing was going to be accomplished and broke off further discussion. Instead of letting the matter drop, Glover records that the Council:

⁷⁷ Drummond, "Prince of Preachers," p. 696-70.

⁷⁸ Ibid., see also, Hopkins, "New Evidence." Some years ago when the Baptist Union moved its offices a large cache of documents were discovered and sent to Regent's Park College. Among those were the council meeting minutes and records of the Down Grade Controversy, records previously thought to be lost. They shed a great deal of light on the inner workings and political intrigue. See also Carlile, p. 247.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 6:257. In his biography of Spurgeon, Drummond misquotes this sentence from Spurgeon slightly. On p. 697, Drummond mistakenly alters the intent of Spurgeon rendering the last part of the quotation, "God knows all about it, and He will see me *write it*." It should be noted that at this time Spurgeon was in Mentone, France convalescing.

⁸¹ Space and purpose prohibit an extended recounting of the events. Spurgeon, by all accounts, was neither inclined nor adept at denominational politics (his brother James, as the history shows, was also less than skilled in this area). Although he was undoubtedly one of the most prominent members of the Union, pasturing the largest church and overseeing the most substantial ministry, he never served on the Council itself nor in any official position. W. Robertson Nicoll stated, "His was a nature little fitted for many things that befell him in the last lacerating years" (Nicoll, *Princes of the Church* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921], p. 54). Nicholl, although a great admirer of Spurgeon, nonetheless was himself at least partly responsible for the introduction of liberalism into British churches through his influential journal, *The Expositor*. He closed his comments on Spurgeon with the rather cryptic, "Better for him, better, perhaps, for us, that he has gone up the shining road."

Taking advantage of Spurgeon's refusal to make personal denunciations, the Council accused him of bringing charges without evidence. Since no individuals had been charged, this was a meaningless quibble.⁸²

The result was that the Baptist Union issued a vote of censure against Spurgeon on January 18, 1888. Regarding the Council and the action by the Baptist Union Glover noted:

They were not prepared to admit the general charge of a loss of evangelical faith, and they were afraid that any admission of his specific charges would lead to unnecessary and fruitless controversy within the Union. The policy which they adopted was to attempt to put the responsibility for disturbing the peace back on Spurgeon. They took the position that his charges were too vague to merit serious investigation, that he failed to substantiate them by naming any ministers who were guilty. However useful this policy might have been politically, can only be described as dishonest trifling with the subject. Spurgeon's resentment was well founded.⁸³

Carlile reached a similar conclusion:

Spurgeon was never righted. The impression in many quarters still remains that he made charges which could not be substantiated, and when properly called upon to produce his evidence, he resigned and ran away. Nothing is further from the truth. Spurgeon might have produced Dr. Booth's letters; I think he should have done so.⁸⁴

Spurgeon himself responded to the censure in the February 1888 issue of *The Sword and Trowel*. He stated:

I brought no charges before the members of the council, because they could only judge by their constitution, and that document lays down no doctrinal basis except that belief in "immersion of believers is the only Christian Baptist." Even the mention of evangelical sentiments has been cut out from their printed programme. No one can be heretodox under this constitution, unless he should forswear his baptism. I offered to pay the fee for the Counsel's opinion upon this matter, but my offer was not accepted by their deputation. There was, therefore nothing for me to work upon, whatever evidence I might bring.⁸⁵

Spurgeon had received a deputation from the Baptist Union on January 13, 1888, consisting of Samuel Harris Booth, the general secretary of the Union; James Culross, the Union Presi-

⁸² Glover, "English Baptists," p. 50.

⁸³ Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists*, p. 172.

⁸⁴ Carlile, *C. H. Spurgeon*, 248-49.

⁸⁵ Spurgeon, Charles H. "The Baptist Union Censure," *The Sword and Trowel* 24 (February 1888), p. 81.

dent; and John Clifford, the Union vice-president. Clifford, who would become the president of the Union the following year, seems to have been a focal point in the discussion and the drive to finally censure Spurgeon. The other member to have been present was Dr. Alexander Maclaren of Manchester, the only other pastor in the Baptist Union who approached Spurgeon's international influence. However, while Maclaren was repeatedly appointed and commissioned to meet with Spurgeon on behalf of the Union, he was always "unavailable" at crucial times.⁸⁶ The meeting was described as "quite tense"⁸⁷ and Spurgeon refused to withdraw his resignation. He made two requests: (1) He asked the council to render an opinion as to whether or not the current constitution of the Union allowed for the removal of heretics, and offered to pay for the expenses of those deliberations, as he noted above; (2) and again asked for a adoption of a "evangelical statement of doctrine." Spurgeon wrote to Culross stating, "so long as Association without a creed has no aliens in it, nobody can wish for a creed formally, for the spirit is there; but at a time what 'strange children' have entered what is to be done?"⁸⁸ Both requests were refused. Glover points out plainly some of the problems involved:

The dishonesty of the Council's position lay in the fact that the vice-president and several members were themselves in fundamental disagreement with Spurgeon on the specific issues involved. Clifford and his chief supporters, Alexander Maclaren and Charles Williams, had rejected the doctrine of inerrancy of the Scripture and were well aware that one distinguished Baptist minister, Samuel Cox, has made himself one of the best known exponents of universal restoration.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ His name is also rendered McLaren in the literature. There is, in fact, no record that Maclaren ever allowed himself to be involved at any crucial point in this controversy. The relationship between Spurgeon and Maclaren was never much more than perfunctory, but it seems that Maclaren would have been more honest to simply decline the appointments to the committee.

⁸⁷ Drummond, *Prince of Preachers*, p. 698.

⁸⁸ Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, p. 4:263.

⁸⁹ Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists*, p. 172-73. See also Underwood, *A history of the English Baptists*, p. 230.

After Spurgeon had resigned from the Union it was feared that the organization itself would split and that Spurgeon would form a new denomination. In his first article there is a hint that he had considered this. "It might be possible," he stated, "to make an informal alliance among those who hold the Christianity of their fathers."⁹⁰ However, by November 1887 he clearly stated that a new denomination was not his intention.⁹¹ Spurgeon never mounted an effort to encourage people to leave the Union, and in fact few followed Spurgeon's lead.

The Results of the Down Grade

The main result of the controversy was that the evangelical hegemony, whether real or perceived, in the Baptist Union was broken. Everything that Spurgeon feared regarding the future of British evangelicalism came to pass within a very short time. Glover, who disagreed with Spurgeon's theology at almost every point, still admitted:

Spurgeon's insight into the religious life and his own times was proved by subsequent events. He did stand on the verge of a great evangelical depression, and unquestionably the theological confusion of his day and the disturbance to religious traditions wrought by higher criticism had a great deal to do with the decline of evangelicalism.⁹²

MacArthur, more sympathetic to Spurgeon, concluded a similar sentiment:

It was surely difficult for Spurgeon himself, and even his early biographers, to assess the value of the Down-Grade Controversy. In those last years of Spurgeon's life, the strife was so much in the foreground that it obscured for most observers the real importance of the stand Spurgeon had taken. Spurgeon was the first evangelical with international influence to declare war on modernism. The Baptist Union was never the same. But the Evangelical Alliance, an interdenominational fellowship stood with Spurgeon and gained strength.⁹³

⁹⁰ Spurgeon, "Another Word," p. 400.

⁹¹ Spurgeon, Charles H. "A Fragment upon the Down-Grade Controversy," *The Sword and Trowel* 23 (November 1887), p. 560

⁹² Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformist*, p. 248.

⁹³ MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, p. 225.

In the post-mortem of the Down Grade Controversy Spurgeon joined with a group of like-minded pastors in a “Fraternal Union” and published a declaration and statement of faith. It was widely published and commonly became known as “Spurgeon’s Confession of Faith” or “Spurgeon’s Manifesto.” An article in *The Sword and Trowel* detailed the development of this “fraternal” Spurgeon’s relation to it. It was not the statement that he had proposed earlier to the Baptist Union, nor was association in the “fraternal” limited to Baptists. It was perhaps the manifestation of what Spurgeon had referred to in 1887 as an “informal alliance.”⁹⁴ The preamble and the actual statement are important to read here:

We, the undersigned, banded together in Fraternal Union, observing with growing pain and sorrow the loosening hold of many upon the Truths of Revelation, are constrained to avow our firmest belief in the Verbal Inspiration of all Holy Scripture as originally given. To us, the Bible does not merely contain the Word of god, but is the Word of God. From beginning to end, we accept it, believe it, and continue to preach it. To us, the Old Testament is no less inspired than the New. The Book is an organic whole. Reverence for the New Testament accompanied by skepticism as to the Old appears to us to absurd. The two must stand or fall together. We accept Christ’s own verdict concerning “Moses and all the prophets” in preference to any of the supposed discoveries of so-called higher criticism. We hold and maintain the truths generally known as “the doctrines of grace.” The Electing Love of God the Father, the Propitiatory and Substitutionary Sacrifice of his Son, Jesus Christ, Regeneration by the Holy Ghost, the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness, the Justification of the sinner (once for all) by faith, his walk in the newness of life and growth in grace by the active indwelling of the Holy Ghost, and the Priestly Intercession of our Lord Jesus, as also the hopeless perdition of all who reject the Savior, according to the words of the Lord in Matt. xxv. 46, “These shall go away into eternal punishment,” –are, in our judgment, revealed fundamental truth. Our Hope is the personal Pre-millennial Return of the Lord Jesus in glory.⁹⁵

Spurgeon also produced a small book entitled *The Greatest Fight in the World*, a condensation of Spurgeon’s last address to his Pastor’s College Conference. This work was Spurgeon’s last call to theological orthodoxy before the final illness that would take his life in six months. Bebbington notes:

⁹⁴ Spurgeon, “Another Word,” p. 400.

⁹⁵ “Mr. Spurgeon’s Confession of Faith,” *The Sword and Trowel* 27 (August 1891), p. 446.

Spurgeon's protest against emerging liberal tendencies may not have carried many with him at the time, but the enduring esteem in which he was held in the whole Evangelical world ensured a wider hearing for conservative opinion in subsequent generations.⁹⁶

Lessons from the Down Grade

During the years of the Down Grade Controversy Spurgeon repeatedly warned of six areas of "down grade" in evangelical doctrine.

- *The denial of the verbal inspiration (that is, inerrancy) of Scripture.*
- *The denial of eternal punishment and the affirmation of universalism.*
- *The denial of the Trinity, mainly in terms of the rejection of the personality of the Holy Spirit.*
- *The movement towards Socinianism or the denial of the deity of Christ and original sin*
- *The denial of the creation account in Genesis in favor of evolution.*
- *The unhealthy influence of Higher Criticism on Biblical scholarship, particularly as it related to the Old Testament.*

He summarized his position on the theological trends in his day as he stated:

Look at the church of the present day; the advanced school, I mean. In its midst we see preachers who have a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof. They talk of the Lord Jesus, but deny his Godhead, which is his power; they speak of the Holy Spirit, but deny his personality, wherein lies his very existence. They take away the substance and power from all the doctrines of revelation, though they pretend still to believe them. They talk of redemption, but they deny substitution, which is the essence of it; they extol the Scriptures, but deny their infallibility, wherein lies its value; they use the phrases of orthodoxy, and believe nothing in common with the orthodox.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Bebbington, David. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730's to the 1980's*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 146.

⁹⁷ Spurgeon, Charles H. "The Form of Godliness without the Power," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit; Sermons Preached and Revised by C. H. Spurgeon in the Year 1889*. (reprint, Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1975), p. 308.

This list is remarkably similar to the entry on “Evangelicalism” in the revised *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* by Pierard and Elwell cited in the introduction of this article.

As Pierard and Elwell note several aspects of evangelical theology, which were formerly agreed on by consensus, are under debate. The focus of attention today is not on the personality of the Holy Spirit, but rather God the Father Himself. As Pettegrew notes:

After two thousand years of Christian theology, serious Bible-believing Christians are once again debating what God is like. The debate is not even about peripheral matters or technicalities; it actually revolves around some of the basic attributes of God.⁹⁸

One can only imagine what Spurgeon would have thought had he seen Openness and Process Theology propagated during his lifetime. That noted evangelical scholars such as Clark Pinnock, John R. W. Stott and John Wenham today should be denying eternal punishment⁹⁹ while others advocate a “larger hope” or one of the various forms of universalism, denying the absolute necessity of the Gospel for salvation¹⁰⁰ should not be viewed as something new, Spurgeon fought against the same thing over 100 years ago.

Spurgeon saw clearly that the greatest dangers of the “New Theology” and the result of the Down Grade were on the practical ministry of the church; that is (1) evangelism, and (2) prayer, which he called that “which constitutes their strength.”¹⁰¹ He noted that this movement was leading to the concealment of the gospel and the slighting of the life of prayer.¹⁰² In relation to evangelism, the growing trend of universalism; that is, the ultimate reconciliation of all things to Christ or the salvation of all men regardless of their faith in

⁹⁸ Pettegrew, Larry D. “Is There Knowledge in the Most High (Psalm 73:11),” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 12:2 (Fall 2001), p. 133.

⁹⁹ Mayhue, Richard L. “Hell Never, Forever, or Just for Awhile?” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9:2 (Fall 1998), 129.

¹⁰⁰ MacArthur, John. “Open Theism’s Attack on the Atonement,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 12:1 (Spring 2001), 6ff.

¹⁰¹ Spurgeon, “Another Word,” p. 400.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

Christ in this life.¹⁰³ Spurgeon saw clearly how this teaching was deadly to the work of evangelism. If all men would ultimately be saved, what was the real impetus for evangelism to be? Where universalism and its twin-sister, the denial of eternal punishment, become dominate the message of the church was reduced to either moralism or social action.

As earlier noted, Samuel Cox's two works *Salvator Mundi; or, Is Christ the Savior of all Men* (1877) and his sequel *The Larger Hope* (1883), make it clear that both eternal punishment is to be rejected and that God will see to the salvation of all men, even those who reject Christ. He states clearly,

And what else, or less, do our Lord's own words imply: "It shall be *more tolerable* for them at the day of judgment than for you?" Lives there the man with soul so dead and brain so narrow that he can take these solemn words to mean nothing more than that the men of Tyre and Sidon will not be condemned to quite so hot a fire as the men of Chorazin and Bethsaida! Must they not mean at least that in the future, as in the present, there will be diversities of moral condition, and a discipline nicely adapted to those diversities? May they not mean that those who have sinned against a little light will, after having been chastened for their sins with a "few stripes," receive more light, and be free to walk in it if they will? We are often chastened in this world that we may not be condemned with the World, often judged and condemned and punished that we may be aroused to repentance and saved unto life everlasting. Why, then, should we always take the chastenings of the world to come to mean judgments, and the judgments to mean condemnations, and the condemnations to mean nothing short of a final and irreversible doom? On the contrary, we ought rather to hope that while during the brief hours of time our lives describe but "broken arcs," in eternity, and through whatever chastening and discipline may be requisite for us, they will reach "the perfect round."¹⁰⁴

So, while it would certainly be nice and preferable for people to trust in Christ in this life, according to universalism, it isn't necessary and it may not even be practical.

The inroads of Higher Criticism in evangelical scholarship today is not only to be found questioning the Old Testament; but also the New Testament, as Thomas and Farnell

¹⁰³ This view traces its roots back to Origen, who affirmed that not only would all men be saved, but even Satan and the demons would be "reconciled" to God in Christ.

¹⁰⁴ Cox, Samuel. *Salvator Mundi; or Is Christ the Savior of All Men*. (London: Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 25.

have demonstrated.¹⁰⁵ Questioning Pauline authorship of the pastorals, once a relic of liberalism, now finds its way into evangelical scholarship.¹⁰⁶ The real and/or practical rejection of inerrancy of the Scripture (as traditionally understood), the advocacy of theistic evolution, the denial of the reality of Adam and Eve,¹⁰⁷ the rejection of the worldwide flood,¹⁰⁸ all have various evangelical proponents. The journal of the *Evangelical Theological Society* even published an article which declared that, “Spurgeon’s understanding of the nature and interpretation of the Bible does not adequately serve this generation of evangelical Christians who have come to accept the best of current Biblical scholarship while holding concurrently to the inspiration and authority of Scripture.”¹⁰⁹ This is an opinion that could have been just as easily written by one of Spurgeon’s critics during the Down Grade Controversy and would be as specious then as it is today.

Beyond these disturbing theological trends, the key lesson to be derived from the Down Grade Controversy is the need for diligence. Spurgeon was lambasted for being unloving and old-fashioned in his stand against the theological slide of his day. Even those leaders, who in past times stood for Biblical truth, occasionally fall away (as Booth did). Even formerly sound publications can become suspect. Speaking of the affirmation of Open Theism in *Christianity Today*, David Wells stated,

To rebuff so large a part of the evangelical world requires considerable moral authority. And this is precisely the kind of authority *Christianity Today* has now forfeited as it

¹⁰⁵ Thomas, Robert L. and F. David Farnell (editors). *The Jesus Crisis*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1998).

¹⁰⁶ Carson, D. A. *New Testament Commentary Survey* (5th Edition). (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2001), p. 107.

¹⁰⁷ Young, Davis A. “The Antiquity and the Unity of the Human Race Revisited,” *Christian Scholars Review* 24 (1995), 380-96.

¹⁰⁸ Swanson, Dennis M. “Extra-Biblical Evidence, General Revelation, and Scripture: A Response to David A. Young’s ‘The Biblical Flood,’” *Journal of Christian Apologetics* 2:1 (Summer 1998), 3-24.

¹⁰⁹ Ferguson, Duncan S. “The Bible and Protestant Orthodoxy: The Hermeneutics of Charles Spurgeon.” *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 25:4 (December 1982), p. 466.

has steadily divested itself of theological substance and passed up opportunity after opportunity to show a little moral courage. Slick and professional it is, but uncertain and directionless is also appears to be.¹¹⁰

Vigilance is neither easy, nor is it popular. Spurgeon, as previously noted, was never vindicated in his lifetime and only decades later was his concerns related to the Down Grade shown to be more true than perhaps even he realized. The lesson of continued diligence continues to this day. Fighting his own battle for orthodoxy in the 1960's, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones stated,

We have evidence before our very eyes that our staying amongst such people does not seem to be converting them to our view but rather to a lowering of the spiritual temperature of those who are staying amongst them and an increasing tendency to doctrinal accommodation and compromise.¹¹¹

Conclusion

In his work, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, Iain Murray noted that the prevalent attitude on the part of the Baptist Union leadership was, “an unwillingness to define precisely any doctrinal issue, a readiness to reduce what constitutes the content of orthodox Christianity to a minimum, and a ‘charity’ which made men unwilling to question the standing of any denomination in the sight of God so long as it professed the ‘Evangelical Faith.’”¹¹² Harrison

¹¹⁰ Wells, David F. “Foreward” in *Whatever Happened to the Reformation?* Gary L. W. Johnson and R. Fowler White, ed’s. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2001), p. xxiii

¹¹¹ Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn. *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 147. Sadly enough Lloyd-Jones was fighting the same battle within the Evangelical Union in England (the Union that Spurgeon had supported) that Spurgeon had fought within the Baptist Union. In this we note that diligence is needed in every generation for Biblical and doctrinal fidelity. For this history of this particular struggle see, Iain Murry, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950-2000* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001). For other warnings see: David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993); Gary L. W. Johnson and R. Fowler White (ed’s), *Whatever Happened to the Reformation?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 2001); and John F. MacArthur, *The Battle for the Beginning* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossways Books, 2002). See also *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 12:2 (Fall 2001) an issue containing the articles from the 2001 Faculty Lecture Series on the controversy of Open Theism.

¹¹² Murray, Iain. *The Forgotten Spurgeon*. (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), p. 156.

notes that for the Union council to “pretend that the effects [of doctrinal error] were marginal and superficial is disingenuous almost beyond belief.”¹¹³ Murray pointedly adds:

As we look back now on the last decades of the 19th century we cannot exonerate orthodox ministers who allowed the term ‘evangelical’ to become debased: they had not the strength to declare that men were not ministers of Christ who, while professing the ‘Evangelical Faith’, either never preached that Faith or practically repudiated it in the details of their teaching.¹¹⁴

Spurgeon himself warned, “There is truth and there is error and these are opposite the one to the other. Do not indulge yourselves in the folly with which so many are duped—that truth may be error, and error may be truth, that black is white, and white is black, and that there is a whitey-brown that goes in between, which is, perhaps, the best of the whole lot.”¹¹⁵

With the “core of belief” of Evangelicalism now open for discussion, one wonders if a book will be written in 40 or so years which describes the current state of American Evangelicalism as a powerful, effective and efficient instrument in the hands of God; declaring His Glory and expounding His Truth, or as a movement “In Search of Foundations”?

¹¹³ Harrison, “C. H. Spurgeon,” p. 98.

¹¹⁴ Murray, *Forgotten Spurgeon*, p. 156.

¹¹⁵ Spurgeon, “Three Sights Worth Seeing,” in the *MPT 1887*, p. 476.