

## C.H. Spurgeon and the Downgrade Controversy

In February 1888, the Baptist Union would meet together for the first time without one of its most prominent members. During this same meeting the Baptist Union also released a statement, censuring that very same member. This censure was aimed at a man who one year earlier in 1887 sparked a controversy that is now known as the Downgrade Controversy when he wrote in the preface of his magazine *The Sword and The Trowel*:

We have had enough of “The Downgrade” for ourselves when we have looked down upon it. What havoc false doctrine is making, no tongue can tell. Assuredly the New Theology can do no good towards God for man; it has no adaptation for it. If it were preached for a thousand years by all the most earnest men of the school, it would never renew a soul, nor overcome pride in a single human heart... The sword and trowel have both been used this year with all our might. We have built up the wall of the city, and have both tried to smite the king’s enemies. How could we help it? No loyal soldier could endure to see his Lord’s cause so grievously wronged by traitors. Something will come of the struggle over the Downgrade.<sup>1</sup>

The man who wrote this in 1887 is Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), a reformed baptist preacher who has gone down in history as “The Prince of Preachers” and whose influence can still be seen today in almost every Christian bookstore.<sup>2</sup> Spurgeon himself is well known for his sermons and his influence on nineteenth-century Christianity, as well as for his strong defense of Calvinism which is what many believe to be the reason why Spurgeon started the Downgrade Controversy. Therefore, my purpose with this paper is to analyze the Downgrade controversy from Spurgeon’s point of view, the reactions people had to it, and its impact, in order to show that Spurgeon’s main goal in the Downgrade controversy was not to defend Calvinism, but

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<sup>1</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “Preface: From the 1887 Sword and Trowel Annual Volume,” *The Downgrade Controversy*, (Lexington, KY: 2018), 4.

<sup>2</sup> In 2017 the makers of the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) would make a Spurgeon Study Bible edition of their translation.

rather, to defend the doctrine of the infallibility<sup>3</sup> of Scripture (the Bible). To do this I will give a brief biography on C.H. Spurgeon and a detailed chronology of the Downgrade controversy itself leading up to the death of C.H. Spurgeon in 1892. Throughout my analysis I will use C.H. Spurgeon's own words as much as possible in order to provide the an accurate representation of the Downgrade controversy from C.H. Spurgeon's point of view.

### **Fundamentalist vs Modernist**

C.H. Spurgeon's Downgrade controversy was actually just another chapter in a larger controversy that was transatlantic in nature by the nineteenth century. This is known as the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy in which the Fundamentalists argued to preserve the old way of religion and the Modernists who insisted that religion needed to adapt with the times. A brief summary of this controversy will set the Downgrade controversy in its historical context.

During the nineteenth century Charles Darwin published *Origin of Species* which sent Christians into a tail spin trying to determine what their stance should be on the book and the ideas of evolution and natural selection. George Marsden notes that there was considerable controversy over this issue, but the controversy was fought with far more intensity in America than in England.<sup>4</sup> Fundamentalists fought against the ideas posed in Darwin's book while Modernists claimed that it only proved God's plan for humanity. Along with this came the controversy over the nature of Scripture and its infallibility. During the nineteenth century German literature on higher criticism came to light that challenged the nature of Scripture and

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<sup>3</sup> C.H. Spurgeon and other fundamentalists would say that the Bible is inspired, inerrant, and infallible to say that the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore has no error, and if theologically, historically, and scientifically correct.

<sup>4</sup> George Marsden. "Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon, A Comparison with English Evangelicalism." *Church History* 46, no. 2 (1977): 217. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3165007>.

also brought questions of its infallibility. Marsden notes that British theologians were more sympathetic to this higher criticism than their American counterparts. Marsden also points out that there had been an intellectual climate brewing in England that was based on historical and natural developments upon which both Darwinism and higher criticism were based. This made England a good place for the Modernist movement to take hold.<sup>5</sup> Naturally, there was resistance to this development, but by the late 1860s, Darwinism had been largely accepted by the churches of England in all denominations.<sup>6</sup> On the issue of Scripture and its historical accuracy and infallibility, more controversy and debate was to take place. One of these controversies would be C.H. Spurgeon's Downgrade Controversy.

### **A Brief Life of Charles Haddon Spurgeon**

On June 19, 1834 Charles Haddon Spurgeon was born in Essex village, England and would be the first of seventeen children of John and Eliza Jarvis Spurgeon. However, C.H. Spurgeon was one of only eight children who would survive infancy.<sup>7</sup> When he was just one year old his grandparents took him and his family to live with them in Stambourne, where he grew up listening to his grandfather (the Puritan minister of the Stambourne meeting house), his father (who later took the place of C.H. Spurgeon's grandfather as minister of the Stambourne meeting house), and several other ministers from the local area discussing matters of theology. He also listened to both sides of the arguments on sticky theological issues, which prepared Spurgeon for

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<sup>5</sup> George Marsden, "Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon, A Comparison with English Evangelicalism." *Church History* 46, no. 2 (1977): 219. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3165007>.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid* 217.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 19.

his own debates. Spurgeon reflected on his upbringing in his autobiography, “I was privileged with godly parents, watched with jealous eyes, scarcely ever permitted to mingle with questionable associates, warned not to listen to anything profane or licentious, and taught the way of God from my youth up.”<sup>8</sup> Spurgeon also spoke of his mother going over the Bible verse by verse and reading to him Puritan books such as Richard Baxter’s *Call to the Unconverted* after their daily Bible reading.<sup>9</sup>

It was also in Stambourne that Spurgeon gained his love of theology and especially Puritan theology under the guidance of his grandfather. He later said that one cubic inch of a book from John Owen<sup>10</sup> could cover the new school (ministers of his time) in acres of writing.<sup>11</sup> Spurgeon continued to visit his grandfather’s home and continued to take in the information being shared there. He would often go into the library at the meeting house where he absorbed mountains of Puritan books. Spurgeon later wrote in his autobiography,

with the great masters [Puritans] of Scriptural Theology, with whom no moderns are worthy to be named in the same day... Out of that darkened room I fetched those old authors when I was yet a youth, and never was I happier than when in their company. Out of the present contempt into which Puritanism has fallen, many brave hearts and true will fetch it, by the help of God, ere many years have passed.<sup>12</sup>

Despite his love for Puritan books and Christian literature, it was not till the young Spurgeon was sixteen that he experienced his own personal conversion to the Christian faith.

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<sup>8</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, Susannah Spurgeon, Joseph Harrald, *Autobiography Volume I*, (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 2011), 43. First published in 1897-1900. All citations are from the 2011 reprint.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid* 44.

<sup>10</sup> John Owen (1616-1683) was an English Nonconformist church leader, theologian, and academic administrator at the University of Oxford.

<sup>11</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living By Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 24.

<sup>12</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, Susannah Spurgeon, Joseph Harrald, *Autobiography Volume I* (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 2011), 11.

On January 6, 1850 Spurgeon was out early from school due to an outbreak of fever in the school. Because of the snow that day Spurgeon was unable to go with his father to their usual church. Spurgeon instead found himself at the Primitive Methodist Chapel on Artillery Street in Colchester. The usual minister was unable to give the message that day so an uneducated man took his place and gave a brief message on Isaiah 45:22 which reads in the King James Version, “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I *am* God, and *there is* none else.” The young man noticed a heavy-hearted Spurgeon among the small congregation and began to speak to him directly, asking him to look to Christ. Spurgeon recounted this event during a communion sermon at Mentone:

I do remember well when God first visited me, and assuredly it was the night of nature, of ignorance of sin. His visit had the same effect upon me that it had upon Saul of Tarsus when? the Lord spake to him out of heaven. He brought me down from the high horse and caused me to fall to the ground, by the brightness of the light of his Spirit he made me grope in conscious blindness, and in the brokenness of my heart I cried “Lord, what wilt thou have to do?” I felt that I had been rebelling against the Lord, kicking against the pricks, and doing evil even as I could; and my soul filled with anguish... Yet the visit ended not there, for as Lord God clothed our first parents in coats of skins, so did he cover me with the righteousness of the great sacrifice, and he gave me songs in the night.<sup>13</sup>

Four months later Spurgeon experienced another conversion within the Christian faith. His grandfather was a Puritan minister (see page 3) and he along Spurgeon’s father and mother had him sprinkled as a baby as a form of baptism. Spurgeon himself confessed that he had never heard of the Baptist until he was fourteen years old.<sup>14</sup> But on May 3, 1850 (which was also his mother’s birthday) Spurgeon witnessed two women being baptized at Isleham Ferry. It was at

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<sup>13</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “Mysterious Visits,” *Spurgeon’s Sermons on the Death and Resurrection of Jesus* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), 80.

<sup>14</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, Susannah Spurgeon, Joseph Harrald, *Autobiography Volume I* (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, PA, 2011), 45.

this point that Spurgeon would also be baptized as a believer and would himself become a Baptist.<sup>15</sup>

At this point Spurgeon followed his grandfather, and his father, and began his own ministry. Spurgeon later said, “when I was first converted to God, if the Lord had said ‘I have taken you into My house, and I am going to make use of you. and you shall be a door mat for the saints to wipe their feet on,’ I should have said, ‘Ah happy shall I be if I may but take the filth off their blessed feet, for I love God’s people, and if I may minister to them in the slightest degree, it shall be my delight.’”<sup>16</sup> However, Spurgeon would not be a door mat. Instead C.H. Spurgeon began his ministry by sending sealed tracts to people he thought would benefit from them, and within six years of his conversion he used Isaiah 45:22 and the event of his conversion as personal testimony in a sermon before a crowd of over 12,000 people.<sup>17</sup>

C.H. Spurgeon’s first sermon came later in 1850 when he expounded on 1 Peter 2:7, which reads “Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner.” Spurgeon gave this sermon at the request of a friend who said that if C.H. Spurgeon did not give a message, there would not be one. Spurgeon recounted the sermon and the crowd’s reaction in his autobiography, saying that after the message was complete the leading question was “how old are you?” “Not quite sixty was his reply.” “Yes and not quite sixteen an elder woman replied

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<sup>15</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, Susannah Spurgeon, Joseph Harrald, *Autobiography Volume I* (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 2011), 145-150.

<sup>16</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, Susannah Spurgeon, Joseph Harrald, *Autobiography Volume I* (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 2011), 156.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living By Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 38-39.

to him.”<sup>18</sup> It was clear that C.H. Spurgeon had a gift for preaching and the following year (1851) he moved to Waterbeach to take on his first pastoral appointment.

The small church at Waterbeach was unable to support the young minister and so he worked as an usher in a school at Cambridge.<sup>19</sup> While here C.H. Spurgeon often battled with antinomians, who in his words, were those who believing they were elect, thought they could live as they liked. This was the beginning of a battle that carried on in different places right up until Spurgeon’s death and even played a role in the Downgrade Controversy. Spurgeon recalled one man in his autobiography, “[he] held a glass of gin in his hand, declaring all the while that he was one of the chosen people of God. They kicked him out of the public house, and when I heard of it, I felt that it served him right... There is no one who can live in sin—drinking, swearing, lying, and so on—who can truly declare that he is one of the Lord’s chosen people.”<sup>20</sup> This was only one of many cases where Spurgeon dealt with people misunderstanding the Bible.

Three years later C.H. Spurgeon found himself in London taking over another small Church called the New Park Street Chapel. While there Spurgeon started preaching three times on a Sunday and five nights a week. Within two or three years that number skyrocketed to twelve and even thirteen sermons a week.<sup>21</sup> As seats continued to fill, chapel expansions had to be made, and from 1856 to 1859 the congregation met at the Music Hall in the Royal Surrey Gardens (which could hold up to 10,000 people) while the chapel was expanded.<sup>22</sup> After the chapel had been expanded it still could not hold the crowds that Spurgeon attracted. So it was

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<sup>18</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, Susannah Spurgeon, Joseph Harrald, *Autobiography Volume I*, (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 2011), 182-184.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* 219.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid* 224.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid* 319.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid* 432.

decided that the congregation had to relocate and build a new Church which became known as the Metropolitan Tabernacle (completed in 1861). This church during Spurgeon's life would see congregations of over six thousand members and hold services from seven in the morning until eleven at night every day. It was the largest non-conformist church, and is still in use in London to this day.

During Spurgeon's life he read several periodicals every day, sometimes taking issue with the viewpoints expressed in them. For example, one year the *Westminster Review* stated that several of Spurgeon's deacons described him as a "regular pope." Spurgeon called it an "unmitigated lie."<sup>23</sup> Four years after the completion of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, C.H. Spurgeon created his own periodical which he called *The Sword and Trowel*, a periodical that is still published today. Spurgeon used this periodical to write on theological issues while also preaching at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Indeed, it was in this periodical that Spurgeon began the Downgrade Controversy.

### **The Downgrade Controversy**

The roots of the Downgrade controversy are found some ten years prior to Spurgeon writing the preface of the 1887 annual volume of *The Sword and Trowel* mentioned above. In 1877 a Stepney College graduate and editor of the periodical *The Expositor* published the book *Salvator Mundi: Or, Is Christ The Savior of All Men?* The author of that book was Samuel Cox.<sup>24</sup> In the preface to his book Samuel Cox wrote,

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid* 492.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Cox (1826 – 1893) was an English nonconformist divine and Christian universalist, born in London.



Of those teachers and preachers who honestly retain the dogma which attaches an endless torment to the sins of time no man can ask more than that, while they preach it with sincerity, they also keep their minds open to any more light which may break out upon them from God's holy Word; but of those who have seen that light and yet will not suffer it to shine through their teaching, what can one say but that they are less worthy of their high calling than those who still walk in darkness.<sup>25</sup>

Keeping in mind Spurgeon's love of Puritan theology it was no surprise that Spurgeon took offense at this statement. Spurgeon had written several defenses of Calvinist doctrine and had no problem saying that sinners deserved hell unless Christ first moved in them. Spurgeon firmly believed that human nature was radically corrupted from the inside out and had no hope of reaching Christ on its own. Cox on the other hand was introducing a way of thinking that was in line with Arminianism, a theology that was becoming more popular at that time. According to this theology, humankind did possess the ability to choose Christ and did possess the ability to do some good. The main thing for Spurgeon, however, was not that Cox was defending Arminianism, but that he was defending universalism in his book and in his periodical. According to the latter doctrine, everyone would be saved because Christ's sacrifice covered everyone. This teaching to Spurgeon was a clear example of ignoring key texts in the Bible which Spurgeon viewed as divinely inspired, infallible, and authoritative. While Cox himself was later removed from his position as editor of *The Expositor*, the doctrines in his book continued to gain momentum in the years to come and in 1887 Spurgeon took action and started "The Downgrade Controversy."

Spurgeon was never one to fight over little things. He hated seeing people fight over personal matters in church while they should be preaching or witnessing.<sup>26</sup> However, in 1887

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<sup>25</sup> Samuel Cox, *Salvator Mundi: Or, Is Christ The Savior of All Men?* (Tieste Publications: 2017), xi.

<sup>26</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 541.

Spurgeon, who at the time was a prominent member of the Baptist Union, found an issue worth fighting over and led a charge that threatened the very existence of the Baptist Union. In March 1887 an article entitled “The Downgrade” appeared in *The Sword and Trowel*. The author of this article was Robert Shindler and in it he gave historical accounts of previous non-conformist churches that had slipped from sound doctrine and into various heresies.<sup>27</sup> The first example was the Puritans, who were expelled from England under King Charles II in 1662. According to Shindler, the Puritans went on to found several Calvinist churches and after two or three generations became Arian<sup>28</sup> or Socinian<sup>29</sup> in nature. The churches soon found themselves on “the downgrade,” which, as explained by Shindler, happened when denominations “commonly became less simple in their preaching, more speculative and less spiritual in the matter of their discourses and dwelt more on the moral teachings of the New Testament, than on the great central truths of revelation.”<sup>30</sup> For example, they considered commandments such as “do not commit adultery” or “do not judge others” as important, but neglected the parts of Scripture that spoke of God’s wrath, and of Jesus’ true divinity and humanity, considering them to be exaggerated or unimportant. Shindler continued the Downgrade article the following month, continuing his attempt to show his readers other denominations that strayed from belief in the

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid* 542-543

<sup>28</sup> An influential heresy denying the divinity of Christ, originating with the Alexandrian priest Arius (c. 250– c. 336). Arianism maintained that the Son of God was created by the Father and was therefore neither coeternal with the Father, nor consubstantial.

<sup>29</sup> Socinianism is a system of Christian doctrine named for Fausto Sozzini, which was developed among the Polish Brethren in the Minor Reformed Church of Poland during the 16th and 17th centuries and embraced by the Unitarian Church of Transylvania during the same period. It is most famous for its nontrinitarian Christology but contains a number of other unorthodox beliefs as well.

<sup>30</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “The Down Grade March 1887,” *The Downgrade Controversy*, (Lexington, Kentucky: 2018), 6-7.

authority of scripture, traveling down the road to heresy. In this article, however, he also tried to pinpoint the cause of these various denominations going on the downgrade. Shindler says, “Veneration for the sacred Scriptures may certainly be considered as a test of the general purity of religious sentiments... Perhaps it cannot be contradicted that, in proportion as a sect recedes from Calvinism, their veneration for the Scriptures is diminished. The Bible is the Calvinist creed... Arminians, in general, will not be found to be equal to them in this respect.”<sup>31</sup> While it is clear that Shindler held Calvinism as the best overall theological system, it is important to note that Shindler did not believe that the problem was Arminian theology. Rather, he believed it lay in the denominations’ view of the authority of scripture. Spurgeon was in total agreement with Shindler. After all, his own conversion had taken place in a Methodist church and Spurgeon had said that Wesleyan Methodists had adhered to their own distinctive creed while all other denominations had been unfaithful to theirs. In the notes of the April 1887 article “The Downgrade” in *The Sword and Trowel* Spurgeon stated:

We are glad that the article upon “The Downgrade” has excised notice. It is not intended to be an attack on any one, but to be a warning to all. We are asked whether the Methodist are upon “The Downgrade” and we are happy to reply that we do not think so... This, however, is no answer to the historical fact that Arminianism has been the route by which the older dissenters have traveled downward to Socinianism; neither is it a reply to the charge that not a few have in these days gone far beyond evangelical Arminianism, and are on the road to Unitarianism, or something worse. We care far more for the central evangelical truths than we do for Calvinism as a system... On all hands we hear cries for unity in this, and unity in that; but to our mind the main need of the age is not compromise, but conscientiousness.<sup>32</sup>

Robert Shindler was not done with these two articles. In June he wrote an article addressing a trial of five professors at Andover Theological Seminary in Andover, Massachusetts. Regarding the inspiration of scripture (the theme that was central to the

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<sup>31</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “The Down Grade April 1887,” *The Downgrade Controversy* (Lexington, Kentucky: 2018), 19.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 21-22.

downgrade), these five professors believed that the Bible was fallible in science, chronology, and in some of its religious teachings. According to these five professors Scripture did not arise from divine revelation; rather, it came from inner consciousness of the religious writers and must be interpreted by the present day reader's inner consciousness.<sup>33</sup> To Shindler as well as C.H. Spurgeon this was the beginning of the downgrade for any denomination or individual. If one strayed from the belief that all of Scripture is divinely inspired, infallible, and authoritative, it led that person or denomination to believe things that are clearly opposed to the Bible's teachings. For example, if people decided that the Bible was fallible they could decide that the doctrine of God's wrath was only a trick used by writers and parents to train little children to behave, and that there really was no need to worry about hell because God is nothing but love. This sort of thinking led them to continue the downgrade by believing that church attendance was no longer necessary and that obedience to the law and authority was not necessary; this led to their eventual destruction. This sort of downgrade is what C. H. Spurgeon was afraid the Baptist Union was falling into.

Spurgeon continued his warning on the downgrade with his article "Another Word Concerning the Downgrade" in the August 1887 edition of *The Sword and Trowel*. In this edition Spurgeon addressed not only doctrinal decline, but spiritual decline as well, and showed the relationship between the two, saying, "At the back of doctrinal falsehood comes a natural decline of spiritual life."<sup>34</sup> By this point many were pushing back against Spurgeon and were using magazines of their own to discredit Spurgeon. One such magazine was *The Christian World*,

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<sup>33</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 544.

<sup>34</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, "Another Word Concerning the Down Grade August 1887," *The Downgrade Controversy* (Lexington, Kentucky: 2018), 23.

which Spurgeon claimed to express opinions contrary to his own.<sup>35</sup> The publisher of *The Christian World* claimed to have a weekly readership of over 500,000 people and Spurgeon quoted this magazine in the October 1887 edition of *The Sword and The Trowel*:

We are now at the parting of the ways, and the younger ministers especially must decide whether or not that will embrace and undisguisedly proclaim that modern thought which in Mr. Spurgeon's eyes is a deadly cobra, while in ours it is the glory of the century. It discards many of the doctrines dear to Mr. Spurgeon and his school, not only as untrue and unscriptural, but as in the strictest sense immoral for it cannot recognize the moral possibility of imputing either guilt or goodness, or the justice of inflicting everlasting punishment for temporary sin. It is not so irrational as to pin its faith to verbal inspiration, or so idolatrous as to make its acceptance of *a true Trinity of divine manifestation cover polytheism*.<sup>36</sup> (emphasis added)

With *The Christian World's* nonchalant dismissal of the Trinity, Spurgeon felt more justified than ever about his earlier articles concerning the Downgrade controversy. He continued the assault using his pulpit at the Metropolitan Tabernacle and in *The Sword and Trowel*, publishing articles in November and December of 1887. The preface to his 1888 annual edition returned to the Downgrade yet again, even though by this time Spurgeon was accused of prudery, bigotry, and joylessness, and for believing in a theological system that was out of date. However, despite these accusations he continued his fight because he was sure that these accusations merely showed the declining state of spirituality in the churches. During these later months of 1887 Spurgeon engaged in private conferences with the Secretary of the Baptist Union, S.H. Booth. During these conferences Spurgeon laid before Mr. Booth evidence that readers of *The Sword and Trowel* had presented to him from their churches or other churches that they were connected to in a first hand way that proved that Spurgeon was right to be ringing this spiritual alarm bell. Booth shared stories of his own and Spurgeon continued the assault in *The*

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<sup>35</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 545.

<sup>36</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, "The Case Probed October 1887," *The Downgrade Controversy* (Lexington, Kentucky: 2018), 39.

*Sword and Trowel*, being sure to never mention any names. Spurgeon was hoping that the combined weight of both his and Mr. Booth's testimony would bring about the positive action he was hoping for. However, he was disappointed to discover instead several letters that were being written to his magazine and others stating that no denomination in England had strayed from the truth. In response Spurgeon wrote Mr. Booth on October 29, 1877, "I beg to intimate to you, as the secretary of the Baptist Union, that I must withdraw from that society." The day before Spurgeon actually wrote this letter the elders and deacons of the Metropolitan Tabernacle also wrote to Mr. Booth, "We, the deacons and elder of the church, worshipping in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, hereby tender to our beloved Pastor C.H. Spurgeon... And we hereby concur in our sincere appreciation of the zeal with which he maintains the doctrines of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>37</sup>

From the beginning of his actions in the controversy Spurgeon knew that separation from the Baptist Union was all but inevitable. The call for peace and unity was strong and Spurgeon understood the call and wanted the same thing. However, Spurgeon also knew that unity without the truth of God at its center was no real unity at all. In his mind, to be united without God's truth was a conspiracy, not a communion. As things began to get worse in his eyes, Spurgeon saw no other action that he could take except to separate from the Baptist Union. He wrote about this in the November edition of *The Sword and Trowel*. During the same month *The Christian World* confirmed Spurgeon's fears while also attacking him, saying, "It is a plan and literal fact that those who share the opinions he [Spurgeon] condemns constitute a very large majority of all thinking Christian people."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 549.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*, 553.

If Spurgeon had hoped that his withdrawal from the Baptist Union would bring the Union to action, or if he had hoped that his friends in the Union would bring the Union to action, he was sorely disappointed. In January 1888, the Baptist Union voted to censure C.H. Spurgeon and issued the following statement:

The council recognizes the gravity of the charges which Mr. Spurgeon has brought against the Union... since his withdrawal. It considers that the public and general manner in which they have been made reflects on the whole body, and exposes to suspicion brethren who love the truth as dearly as he does. And as Mr. Spurgeon declines to give names of those to whom he intended them to apply, and the evidence supporting them, those charges, in the judgement of the council, ought not to have been made.<sup>39</sup>

Spurgeon later wrote about the censure, saying, “I do not complain of the censure of the Council, or feel the least care about it.”<sup>40</sup> And he continued to publish more on the Downgrade Controversy, stating in March 1887, “The Downgrade Controversy rages, and so it ought to do; for every one who follows will see how every week the evil which we pointed out is more and more manifest.”<sup>41</sup> However, despite his efforts, Spurgeon’s heart was soon broken once again.

The following month in April 1888, the Baptist Union under the presidency of John Clifford<sup>42</sup> (whom Spurgeon had once considered to be a personal friend) voted on a confession of faith to bring unity to the Union. As Spurgeon gained more knowledge of what this confession was to say his spirits sank and he wrote in his April 1888 edition of *The Sword and Trowel*, “The Baptist Union will meet in full assembly on April 23, and the great question then before it will

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<sup>39</sup> Sir James Marchant, *Dr. John Clifford* (London: Cassell and Company, 1924). Quoted in Tom Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 557.

<sup>40</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “The Baptist Union Censure February 1888,” *The Downgrade Controversy* (Lexington, Kentucky: 2018), 39.

<sup>41</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “Notes March 1888,” *The Downgrade Controversy* (Lexington, Kentucky: 2018), 62.

<sup>42</sup> John Clifford (1836–1923) was a British Nonconformist minister and politician.

be—‘Is this Union to have an Evangelical basis or not?’<sup>43</sup> The Union did meet on April 23 and the confessional stance presented before it was intentionally left ambiguous by John Clifford, so much so that Spurgeon declared that it could have two completely different meanings that contradicted each other. However, this was exactly the point. The confession was left ambiguous so that everyone could agree upon it. And in large part, it worked. The vote came in with 2000 accepting it, and seven rejecting it.<sup>44</sup>

If winners and losers could be claimed in this matter, Spurgeon had now lost. His own brother declared that with this confession Spurgeon would be vindicated since it appeased both sides with its ambiguity. However, Spurgeon did not see it that way, writing in his magazine, “A magazine is in some danger of death when the editor is so completely prostrate that his brain will not think, and his right hand cannot hold a pin.”<sup>45</sup> Spurgeon continued bringing up the matter, writing notes in his magazine every month for the remainder of 1888 and even into 1889. He also published several more articles and gave several more sermons. Notes and articles continued to appear until 1891, but Spurgeon never rejoined the Baptist Union. The Downgrade Controversy faded into the background but Spurgeon carried it with him until his death. His wife later said in C.H. Spurgeon’s autobiography, “Mr. Spurgeon’s standard life could not be complete without a reference to that most sorrowful but important episode—the Downgrade Controversy—yet how

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<sup>43</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “Notes April 1888,” *The Downgrade Controversy* (Lexington, Kentucky: 2018), 62.

<sup>44</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 565.

<sup>45</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “Notes July 1888,” *The Downgrade Controversy* (Lexington, KY: 2018), 62.



shall I dare to touch the strings of that riled lute? The lightest and most skillful fingers could scarcely draw harmony from it now.”<sup>46</sup>

On February 11, 1892, the body of Charles Haddon Spurgeon was carried in a five-mile long funeral procession with bells ringing from Newington to Kennington. Thousands lined the streets, public houses were closed and even the flags were hung at half mast. At the same time another memorial in Mentone, France, (where Spurgeon had died twelve days earlier) was performed.<sup>47</sup>

### **Reactions to and the Impact of the Downgrade Controversy**

The drama of this conflict has continued to fascinate historians wishing to write about C.H. Spurgeon. Spurgeon had made it clear that the matter he so ardently wished to address in the Downgrade controversy was the full inspiration and authority of scripture and not his Calvinistic sympathies. He believed that if one stayed true to the Bible as the inspired and infallible word of God, then no one would downgrade to what he called “progressive theology.” However, his contemporaries almost universally failed to see the theological concerns Spurgeon had so ardently expounded.

After the controversy and after Spurgeon’s death there were three main reactions or results to Spurgeon’s Downgrade Controversy. The first was that Spurgeon was in fact defending Calvinism with no regard for the other theological beliefs. One might say that Spurgeon was

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<sup>46</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, Susannah Spurgeon, Joseph Harrald, *Autobiography Volume II* (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 2011), 469. First published in 1897-1900. All citations are to the 2014 reprint.

<sup>47</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 11.

trying to “bind the Baptist Union to the back of John Calvin.”<sup>48</sup> However, Spurgeon had made it clear in *The Sword and Trowel* that he was not so much interested in defending Calvinism, even though that was his preferred theological system. While he did confess that he wished his brothers were Calvinist, he had stated many times that his fight was for the infallibility of the Bible.

The second way people reacted to the controversy was to say that Spurgeon’s illness and age had caused him to be irrational and start the controversy. Spurgeon was fifty-two when he began the controversy and was known for suffering with chronic pain and illness.<sup>49</sup> Friends suggested several remedies for his pain and his illness and if Spurgeon felt any gain in strength at all he was greatly encouraged.<sup>50</sup> His pain and sickness was also accompanied by bouts with depression, and he even admitted that all of this took a toll on him. However, in the middle of 1886 Spurgeon published (and later preached on October 30, 1887) Sermon 1990 of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. He challenged his critics to see if illness or gout makes one melancholic even though it was torture to hold the pen. The opening lines of the sermon read “Holy Scripture is wonderfully full and abiding in its inner sense. It is a springing well, whereat you may draw, and draw again; for as you draw, it springs up for ever new and fresh.” Spurgeon also used a ditty in this sermon; “His thoughts are high his love is wise; His wounds a cure intend; And though he does not always smile; He loves unto the end.”<sup>51</sup> Spurgeon also said in the September issue of *The Sword and Trowel*, “Instead of dealing with these weighty things, our

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, 567.

<sup>49</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 603.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid* 601.

<sup>51</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “A Sermon for the Time Present,” *The Downgrade Controversy* (Lexington, Kentucky: 2018), 114-128.

opponents have set to work to make sneering allusions to our sickness... Our article was written when we were in vigorous health.”<sup>52</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, Spurgeon is not the only one who wrote and defended the articles of *The Sword and Trowel* during the Downgrade Controversy. Robert Shindler had written the first two articles and many sent in letters to the magazine praising Spurgeon’s stand during the controversy and even sent him evidence of the Downgrade in their own congregations.

The third way people reacted actually confirmed Spurgeon’s worst fear during the controversy. They said that Spurgeon’s Calvinistic and Puritan-based theology was out of date and actually harmful to the modern times and the present mentality.<sup>53</sup> Spurgeon had learned about the famous Puritans and held them in high esteem. He read men like John Owen, and his favorite childhood book after the Bible was John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* which he read more than one hundred times throughout his life.<sup>54</sup> This helped build his theology, which included the infallibility of Scripture.

If one could find a spokesman for the fourth group, it would be John Clifford, who wrote a book entitled *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* in which he utterly and clearly rejected the inerrancy of Scripture. Clifford said in his book, “we seriously imperil the authority and limit the service of Scripture every time we advocate its absolute inerrancy.”<sup>55</sup> In this book Clifford went on to make every effort to dismantle the arguments presented for an inerrant Bible. Clifford

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<sup>52</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “Our Reply To Sundry Critics and Enquirers,” *The Downgrade Controversy* (Lexington, Kentucky: 2018), 29.

<sup>53</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living By Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 567,

<sup>54</sup> *ibid* 22.

<sup>55</sup> John Clifford, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (London: James Clark Company, 1923), 63.

believed that the reader could use the Bible to find Christ and then be led to the truths that mattered. By reading the Bible and using common sense the reader could find the real Christ and understand that the authors of Scripture had exaggerated some things such as the miracles of Christ.<sup>56</sup> Comments like this drove Spurgeon to start the Downgrade Controversy. However, this reaction was the one that took hold. Today the Baptist Union of Great Britain maintains the same ambiguity as they had over a century and a quarter ago. The first point of its *Declaration of Principles*<sup>57</sup> reads, “That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His laws.”<sup>58</sup> In a booklet titled *Something to Declare* (a booklet designed to explain the Declaration of Principles) the following statement can be found in regard to the first principle (stated above):

Now, this phrase of the Declaration makes us different from some other evangelicals who have statements of faith that typically include the clause: “Our final authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice is *the Bible*.” The thinking of others seems to be that the Bible is the final authority because it is the writing that witnesses to Christ. The view taken by our Baptist parents who gave us the Declaration is the other way round: our final authority is Jesus Christ, to whom the Bible witnesses.<sup>59</sup>

Over a century later the Baptist Union still maintains that Christ, and not the Bible, is its final authority; it still allows individual churches to interpret the Scripture as they deem fit. While the book *Something to Declare* later quotes Spurgeon’s first sermon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle and states that it does not “Downgrade the Scriptures,”<sup>60</sup> it is clear to see that Spurgeon would

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<sup>56</sup> Tom Nettles, *Living By Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, (Christian Focus Publication: Scotland, 2013), 572

<sup>57</sup> The theological confession adopted by the Baptist Union in 1938.

<sup>58</sup> The Baptist Union Declaration of Principles

<sup>59</sup> Paul Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard Kidd, Michael Quicke, *Something to Declare* (London: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1996), 19.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

not have approved of this Declaration of Principles since it leaves the Scriptures open to be interpreted however anyone deems fit. This leaves the churches open to another "Downgrade."

## **Conclusion**

By the 1890s it was clear that the issue at stake in the Downgrade controversy was the historical accuracy and infallibility of Scripture. Marsden claims that, "By the 1890s most of the clergy had abandoned traditional assumptions concerning the full historical accuracy of Scripture for some form of higher criticism."<sup>61</sup> Gentleman such as John Clifford continued to write books defending the modernist point of view in regard to the Scriptures in hopes that they would help people deepen their faith in an ever changing world. Meanwhile, other theologians like C.H. Spurgeon continued to deny the modernists and to defend a fundamentalist point of view and defend the doctrine of the infallibility of Scripture. Even today the debate is still spread by places such as The Creation Museum and The Ark Encounter located in Northern Kentucky.

The impact of the Downgrade controversy and its influence largely depends on the view point of the person asking the question. If one takes the side that John Clifford took then the Downgrade controversy was nothing more than something that might threaten the unity of churches and denominations. This was one of the major concerns of the Baptist Union and still is today; it is one of the reasons why the Declaration of Principles is left open ended. It allows members of different congregations to remain within the Baptist Union acknowledging that Jesus is Lord and that the Bible is up for interpretation. In the years following the death of C.H. Spurgeon some claimed that Spurgeon had forgotten that he had a natural gift for winning souls

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<sup>61</sup> Marsden, George. "Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon, A Comparison with English Evangelicalism" *Church History* 46, no. 2 (1977): 218.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3165007>.

as a witness, evangelist, and preacher, and had instead fallen into becoming a controversialist. It is true that the Downgrade Controversy had indeed rocked the foundations of the Baptist Union and caused one of its most famous and prominent members to leave. It is also true that the controversy lasted for over five years because Spurgeon constantly brought it up even three years after the Baptist Union had voted to both censure him and vote for its own confessional statement. However on August 25, 1888 the Baptist Convention of the Maritime Provinces of Canada (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, etc.) sent a letter to Spurgeon that represented the opinions of over 44,000 members: “[We] take this opportunity to place on record the high esteem in which our honored brother, Pastor Spurgeon, is held by us; and we hereby express our hearty sympathy with him in his bold and unflinching contention for the truths of the gospel; and it is our earnest prayer to Almighty God that his faith may remain unshaken.”<sup>62</sup> This shows that even during and after the Downgrade Controversy Spurgeon was still seen as an evangelist with a solid faith. Spurgeon’s wife also wrote in C.H. Spurgeon’s autobiography, “many people were foolish enough to suppose that he [C.H. Spurgeon] had adopted a new role, and some said that he would have done more good by simply preaching the gospel, and leaving the so-called ‘heretics’ to go their own way! Such critics must have been strangely unfamiliar with his whole history, for, from the very beginning of his ministry, he had earnestly contended for the faith.”<sup>63</sup> Ever since C.H. Spurgeon began his ministry with the distribution of those tracts after his conversion, he had fought for the Bible and the theology he believed in. The Downgrade controversy was just a continuation of that ministry that in the eyes of many people had become outdated.

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<sup>62</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, “Notes November 1888,” *The Downgrade Controversy* (Lexington, Kentucky: 2018), 62.

<sup>63</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, Susannah Spurgeon, Joseph Harrald, *Autobiography Volume I* (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 2011), 471.

If, however, the one asking the question is on the side of C.H. Spurgeon, then that person may be very concerned to see the Declaration of Principles left so open ended and to see others leaving the Bible open for interpretation. To this person (as with C.H. Spurgeon) the Bible is absolute and final. There is no gray, there is only what the letter or the Bible says and no one has the right to question its divine inspiration or its doctrines. While this person may be concerned to read the Declaration of Principles as well as other church confessions, they will be encouraged to see that C.H. Spurgeon does have contemporaries that take up the same fight that he fought. Arthur Walkington Pink<sup>64</sup> wrote a book in 1917 entitled *The Divine Inspiration of the Bible* in which he laid out his defense of the divine inspiration and the authority of the Bible. In his introduction Pink writes, “Christianity is based upon the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture. The starting point of all doctrinal discussion must be the Bible. Upon the foundation of the Divine Inspiration of the Bible stands or falls the entire edifice of Christian Truth... Surrender the dogma of verbal inspiration and you are left like a rudderless ship on a stormy sea at the mercy every wind that blows.”<sup>65</sup> In the twenty-first century there are still those who defend the divine inspiration and authority of scripture. One such theologian is R.C. Sproul<sup>66</sup> who said

Today, there is an assault on the inerrancy of Scripture that tells us the Bible is a mixture of both truth and error. ultimately, however, this reflects a low view not only of Scripture but also of God. If God is the source of all truth and His Word is truth, to say that He gave us a Bible full of errors is to cast doubt on His character. Inerrancy does not mean the Bible speaks with scientific precision, but it does mean that what it does teach is wholly true.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Arthur Walkington Pink (1 April 1886 – 15 July 1952) was an English Bible teacher who sparked a renewed interest in the exposition of Calvinism.

<sup>65</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Divine Inspiration of the Bible* (Bottom of the Hill Publishing: Memphis, Tennessee) 8. Originally published in 1917.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Charles Sproul (February 13, 1939 – December 14, 2017) was an American theologian, author, and ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America.

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/inspiration-infallibility-inerrancy/>

Spurgeon would be happy to know that there are still those who defend the doctrines of the infallibility of the Bible.

Frankly, the controversy is not over. It has merely continued and is still discussed today among theologians and denominations. Spurgeon's Downgrade controversy was simply another chapter in a story that will most likely drag on until the end of time. As for Spurgeon himself, he is still seen as an influential minister and theologian. His sermons are in print and many can even be found in audio form. Listening to these sermons will give one a chance to hear Spurgeon's theology and will even allow them to see that the fight Spurgeon fought in the Downgrade controversy began long before the first articles were published in 1887 and will continue long into the future.



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