
Where is the God of Spurgeon?

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The centenary of the death of C H Spurgeon on January 31st this year requires comment. The measure and influence of the man has not yet been fully evaluated. He was one of the greatest preachers this nation has known. In some ways he was a true Victorian, certainly in terms of his life span (1834-1892); but the principles and values by which he lived were far from being Victorian. He embodied within his person and ministry the essence of evangelicalism. His place in the history of biblical religion in our nation was definitive. He drew all that was best from his evangelical predecessors and distilled it over a period of forty years in a ministry which circled the globe. He was no mere Baptist; he rose above petty sectarianism - that is how he became a Baptist and later left the Baptist Union - and commanded a following wherever lovers of biblical truth were found.

Spurgeon was far more than a personification of the biblical influences which preceded him. Evangelicalism in Great Britain over the last hundred years has been his lengthened shadow in many ways. Evangelical believers have been fed and sustained by Spurgeon through the vast distribution of his published sermons and other works. He has represented for his successors the throbbing heart of the evangelical faith. He staked out the ground of evangelical belief. The name *Spurgeon* conjures up for us the glorious truths of our gospel. He has been criticized by some men of Reformed persuasion for his moderate Calvinism but Spurgeon was careful to observe biblical boundaries. Philosophical niceties did not appeal to him. He preached the *wisdom of God*. Nonconformity since 1892 has reflected his influence in its evangelical life and fulfilled his dire warnings in its sad decline. And if Spurgeon could be described as the modern Elijah then Lloyd-Jones was the modern Elisha upon whom his mantle fell.

The loss of such men can have a traumatic effect upon the faithful left behind. It was so in the days of Elijah and Elisha (cp 2 Kings 1 & 2). When Elijah was taken up to heaven, his successor Elisha took up the mantle which fell from him and striking the waters of the Jordan cried, **Where is the Lord God of Elijah?** (2:14). Elisha wanted to know that, though Elijah had been taken, Elijah's God was still with his people. As we look back to January 31st 1892 we find ourselves in need of the same re-assurance. Elisha had need to ask the question because he was living in days of apostasy when many professed believers were turning from the living God and despising his revealed word. We too have a similar reason for asking **Where is the Lord God of Spurgeon?** The God of creation, providence, prophecy and of miracles has been repudiated today in favour of man-made concepts. Others speak in super-naturalistic terms, but so subjective are their claims that frequently they resent any attempt to bring them under the judgment of God's word.

Spurgeon was a man of the word. He did not deny that sometimes the Spirit operates directly (cp Sermon on John 14:22, June 10th 1855), but maintained that God always acts in harmony with his word. Whether by rationalism or by extreme subjectivism the truth of God's revealed word is being devalued in our day. Christian unity is being

pursued upon the basis of a common search for truth instead of the sure foundation of truth already *revealed from heaven*. Elijah had to contend against such a mentality. Many in Israel at that time were setting up the worship of Baal and Ashteroth alongside that of the Lord God. Elijah proclaimed revealed truth over against idolatrous views and man-made practices of worship (cp 1 Kings 17:18). Charles Haddon Spurgeon did likewise. 'It is our solemn conviction', he wrote, 'that where there can be no real spiritual communion there should be no pretence of fellowship. Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin'. (Sword and Trowel, November 1887, p 559). That too was Elijah's message. It ought to be obvious to the children of light. Truth and error are irreconcilables, as are light and darkness.

During Spurgeon's lifetime, the Higher Critical Movement had seriously affected the Nonconformist churches. Spurgeon saw the dangers and vigorously contended for the faith of the gospel, especially during the years from 1887 until his death. This became known as the *Downgrade Controversy*. The issues then were the same as they are today, and as they were in New Testament times when Jude exhorted believers to 'earnestly contend for the faith which was once (*hapax*) delivered unto the saints' (v 3), and as they were when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal and Ashteroth.

Preaching at the Metropolitan Tabernacle on April 18th 1889 Spurgeon observed:

In years gone by, you could pretty surely reckon on hearing the gospel if you went into a Nonconformist place of worship; but you cannot reckon in that fashion nowadays, for in some places false doctrine is openly taught, and in others it is covertly advanced. In former times good men differed as they always will, as to the form of their doctrinal system; but with regard to fundamental points, they were at one: it is not so now. (MTP, 1889, p 266).

He then gives details of the fundamentals of the faith which were being called into question:

The Deity of our Lord and his great atoning sacrifice, his resurrection, and his judgment of the wicked, never were moot points in the Church; but they are questioned at this time. The work of the Holy Spirit may be honoured in words; but what faith can be placed in those to whom he is not a person, but a mere influence? God himself is by some made into an impersonal being, or the soul of all things, which is much the same as nothing. Pantheism is atheism in a mask. The plenary inspiration of Holy Scripture, as we have understood it from our childhood, is assailed in a thousand insidious ways. The fall of Adam is treated as a fable; and original sin and imputed righteousness are both denounced. As for the doctrines of grace, they are ridiculed as altogether out of vogue and even the solemn sanctions of the law are scorned as bugbears of the dark ages.

Spurgeon in the same address adds:

For many a year, by the grand old truths of the gospel, sinners were converted, and saints were edified, and the world was made to know that there is a God in Israel; but these are too antiquated for the present cultured race of superior beings. They are going to regenerate the world by Democratic Socialism and set up a kingdom for Christ without the new birth and the pardon of sin. Truly the Lord has not taken away the seven thousand that have not bowed the knee to Baal, but they are, in most cases, hidden away, even as Obadiah hid the prophets in the cave. The latter-day gospel is not the gospel by which we are saved. ...It has not been given by the

infallible revelation of God: it does not pretend to have been. It is not divine: it has no inspired Scripture at its back. It is, when it touches the cross, an enemy; when it speaks of him who died thereon, it is a deceitful friend. Many are its sneers at the truth of substitution: it is irate at the mention of the precious blood. Many a pulpit, where Christ was once lifted high in all the glory of his atoning death, is now profaned by those who cavil at justification by faith.

Like Elijah, Spurgeon suffered greatly for his stand, and, in some senses, died for it. But Spurgeon's words have a contemporary ring. The fundamentals are being denied in the present day. Even professing evangelicals are making light of truths, for which the martyrs were burned, by collaborating with men of liberal, humanistic views and with those of a ritualistic outlook who preach *another gospel*. We are in grave danger of losing the gospel. What is so often preached as *gospel* is lacking in doctrinal and biblical content and is often reduced to a bland sentimentality. There is no real doctrine of sin and no solemn warnings of the place *where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched* (Mark 9:44).

Some may think it improper that we should commemorate men. But Elisha did not consider it improper to cry, *Where is the Lord God of Elijah?* He did not just say, *Where is the Lord God?* God used faithful men moved by the Holy Spirit to communicate his word; and he calls faithful men to preach it. It is fitting, therefore, that the great works and movements of God should be associated with the names of prophets and preachers.

We dare not think what the spiritual state of our nation today would have been had not God given us Spurgeon. The Congregational churches which numbered 4,000 in 1900 have been devastated by liberalism and reduced to a mere shadow of what they once were. Why have the Baptists remained more faithful to the biblical message? One important answer is Spurgeon himself. Spurgeon's College remained a strong influence for the Reformed faith until Dr Percy Evans became Principal in 1925. His review of B B Warfield's *The Inspiration and the Authority of the Bible* reveals how far he had departed from an evangelical position. Many of the Baptist churches in the Home Counties were established by Spurgeon and the men he sent out from his college; and the influence to some extent has persisted. Spurgeon's sermons have been read by people of all denominations. They became a pattern for many preachers and not a few Anglican clergymen, some of whom actually made a practice of re-preaching them. Spurgeon has provided the main evangelical literature for many Christians over the past 130 years. There are very few of the so-called pulpit giants of the last century whose sermons could be read with profit today and the sermons of some of the truly great preachers of the past, such as Whitefield, were better heard than read. There is, however an abiding worth in Spurgeon's sermons.

Elisha cried, *Where is the Lord God of Elijah?* not because Elijah had been the only faithful man in his generation, but because God had used him as an outstanding prophet and leader of the believing remnant in a period of serious apostasy. The same can be said of Spurgeon. In a period of growing rationalism, when enormous confidence was being placed in man's abilities to produce a golden age and when the leaders within the churches were departing from the evangelical faith of their fathers, Spurgeon stood firm and reiterated the truths of the everlasting gospel.

His significance

1. **Spurgeon was a Bible man.** He was captive to the Bible as the word of God. The biblical index of his Sermons reveals the extensive use he made of Scripture. He believed that the whole Bible is the word of God to men. He held to the verbal inspiration and infallibility of the Bible as originally given. He rejected the growing liberalism of the nineteenth century which increasingly subjected the Scriptures to human judgment. For Spurgeon, human thought had to be brought under the judgment of divine revelation and for this reason he repudiated the philosophy of evolution and any other speculative theories in violation of Scripture. This is what lay behind *The Rivulet Controversy* of 1855 and five years later *The Baldwin Brown Controversy*. He was not very interested in apologetics, and when he attempted it in *THE CLUE OF THE MAZE*, 1881 he was clearly not at his best. He believed that the Bible was well able to look after itself. (cp Speeches given at the Annual Meetings of the BFBS in 1864 and 1875 in *Speeches by C H Spurgeon*, 1878). The best defence of the Bible is to let loose its great truths, and this he did to an astonishing degree. He was not enticed by speculative thought in any way; whether of liberal theories, philosophical debate or uncertain prophetic interpretations. He knew his God-given commission was to preach the word.
2. **Spurgeon was a gospel man;** not just in the sense that he believed the gospel as do all Christians, but the gospel of God's free grace to sinners was the organizing principle of his whole life and ministry. In this respect he was clearly not a Victorian; he had none of the moralism of that moralistic age. His opposition to the *social-gospellers* arose out of his deep conviction that society can only be effectively changed when individuals are born again by the power of God. It is regrettable that the Radio 4 broadcast services at the end of January arranged by Spurgeon's College should have focused upon his social work as though that were his main contribution. He saw the gospel at the heart of all moral and social restoration. The gospel does not make its appeal to what is within man, as though there is some spark of goodness which can be fanned into a flame. That was not Spurgeon's view. He knew that apart from the free grace and favour of God there is no hope for man. The sinner needs God's mercy and God's renewing power. He saw the gospel as the single ray of light in a fallen world. His handling of the Scriptures, his exposition of the word and his preaching were all conditioned, rightly we believe, by the gospel. This probably accounts for the lack of a clear distinction in his preaching between ministry to the saints and gospel preaching to sinners. All his Sermons are 'gospel sermons'. He can visualize no motivation and godly action on the part of believers apart from the gospel and certainly no hope for unbelievers.
3. **Spurgeon was a Christ-centred man.** In as much as the gospel focuses upon Christ, and the gospel of God's grace was the organizing principle of all Spurgeon's thinking, so Christ was central in his preaching; and not just Christ, but *Jesus Christ and him crucified*; as was imprinted on the covers of all volumes of the *METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE PULPIT*. The purposes of God revealed in the gospel find their fulfilment in the Cross. As far as Spurgeon was concerned the eternal decrees, the OT revelation, the Incarnation and even the Resurrection, the Ascension, Pentecost and the growth of the Church, all hinged upon *Jesus Christ*

and him crucified. To shift the focus of attention to the decrees of God, or to the Incarnation, or to the Holy Spirit and Pentecost, will upset the balance of truth. No preacher has maintained a greater biblical balance than Spurgeon.

In a day when confusion seems to reign, the churches need to enquire, **Where is the Lord God of Elijah?** and **Where is the Lord God of Spurgeon?** The questions can be answered clearly and emphatically. The Lord God is where his word is proclaimed. That is how he speaks and makes himself known; and when his glorious gospel is preached, it can come to men *not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit* in answer to believing prayer. Whenever the Lord Jesus Christ is honoured and exalted, and faith, life and hope are centred upon him, there God is pleased to presence himself among men.

So faithfulness to the Bible, to the truths of the gospel and to the person and work of Jesus Christ must be our priority. Like Spurgeon, we must emphasize the centralities of the faith. Believers are falling out today over secondary issues and at the same time often failing to assent to and maintain the fundamentals of the faith. Spurgeon closed his conference address to his college-trained men in 1889 with these words:

I shall be gone from you ere long. You will meet and say to one another, ‘The President has departed. What are we going to do?’ I charge you, be faithful to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and the doctrines of his grace. Be ye faithful unto death and your crowns will not be wanting. ...The Lord himself bless you! Amen.

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‘Where is the Lord God of Elijah?’ This question comes in most appropriately when some great difficulty lies in your way. Before Elisha, the Jordan is flowing, a deep and rapid stream; how is he to cross it? He takes the mantle which those waters knew before, when Elijah passed that way, and striking them with it, he cries, ‘Where is the Lord God of Elijah?’ and the waters at once divide, and the prophet walks through. Have you come to a great difficulty, my dear friend? Cannot you get over it? Are you in trouble about it? Now, if this is a difficulty that ought to be removed, the shortest way to have it removed is to go to God about it. If it be one that ought not to be removed, then also you have done rightly in going to God for he who will not remove it will at least give you grace to glorify him in some other way. The best thing we can do, in all times of trouble and trial, is to lay the matter before the Lord.

I do not think that we shall ever find that any man truly trusted in God, and yet was confounded. No difficulty which was ever propounded to the Most High, and left in his hands, ever remained a difficulty long. He has the solution of all our problems, the answer to all our riddles. He can work out to a blessed result all our difficulties. There is nothing which can possibly be beyond the power of Him whose name is Jehovah, the I AM, God all-sufficient.

C H Spurgeon on 2 Kings 2:14, MTP 44, p 543
