
The Big Man Must Go!

David Boorman

This is the first of a two-part account of the Downgrade Controversy. A second article will trace its course from the time of Spurgeon's resignation to the Baptist Union assembly in April 1888 and will consider the relevance of the Controversy for today.

The Downgrade Controversy took its name from two unsigned articles entitled *The Down Grade*, which appeared in Spurgeon's magazine THE SWORD AND TROWEL in the spring of 1887. Written by Robert Shindler of Addlestone, they were historical in nature, dealing with the defection in the eighteenth century from the faith of the Puritans. To the first Spurgeon appended the footnote: 'earnest attention is requested for this paper. There is need of such warnings as this history affords. We are going down-hill at break-neck speed'.¹ The second drew forth a similar footnote.²

Denominational Changes

This Controversy can only be understood in the context of the 'prehistory' of the Baptist Union, and of developments in nineteenth century thought, especially in the fields of science and theology. What eventually came to be *The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland* had its origins in a 'Society', which, at its foundation in 1813, was described as a 'General Union', made up of Baptist ministers and churches maintaining Reformed doctrines and observing a congregational (in contrast to a presbyterian or episcopal) form of church polity. Three years later it became 'The General Meeting of the Particular (or Calvinistic) Baptist Denomination'. One of its founders, Joseph Ivimey, had written in 1811: 'We are anxious to see such a union prevail in our Denomination as shall most effectively continue all our efforts in the cause of Truth and Righteousness at home, and give ten-fold vigour to our exertions on behalf of the heathen abroad'.³ The 'Truth' was defined succinctly in the initial constitution of the Union as:

Three equal persons in the Godhead; eternal and personal election; original sin; particular redemption; free justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ; efficacious grace in regeneration; the final perseverance of real believers; the resurrection of the dead; the future judgment; the eternal happiness of the righteous; and the eternal misery of such as die impenitent.⁴

Had the Baptist Union in subsequent years remained upon that foundation, there would have been no Downgrade Controversy. But sadly, nineteen years later, in 1832, the objects of the General Union were redefined. No longer was there any specific reference to the doctrines of free and sovereign grace. Henceforth the Union would exist to 'extend brotherly love and union among the Baptist ministers and churches who agree in the sentiments usually denominated evangelical'.⁵ The disappearance of distinctive Reformed truths opened the way for the adherence to the Union of what was known as the *New Connexion* of the General

Baptists whose stance was an Arminian one. With the passage of time even the phrase 'the sentiments usually denominated evangelical' became ambiguous and liable to misrepresentation and misuse. Of course, by the time that this was realised, it was too late to turn back the tide even if there had been any real support for such a course of action. What actually happened was that, in 1873, all reference to 'evangelical sentiments' was removed, and the basis of the Union became, 'In this Union it is fully recognized that every separate church has liberty to interpret and administer the laws of Christ, and that the immersion of believers is the only Christian baptism'.⁶ Such was the 'doctrinal basis', if it be worth of such a name, at the time of the Downgrade Controversy.

But what was the function of the Union? The Union of 1813 was formed for the purpose 'of affording to the ministers and churches of the denomination the means of becoming better acquainted with each other, with a view to excite brotherly love, and to furnish a stimulus for a zealous co-operation in promoting the cause of Christ in general, and particularly in our own denomination, and especially to encourage and support our missions'. The aims may seem modest but it needs to be remembered that there were already in existence, among the Particular Baptists, a Missionary Society, a Home Missionary Society, a Widows' Fund, and a fund known as the Particular Baptist Fund designed to help ministers and churches in particular need. Although these various funds and societies were commended by the General Union to its member churches as worthy of their support, they were not controlled by the Union.

Over the years, however, the original functions of the Union were extended. The Union opened its own Church Extension Fund to help with the building of new churches; it established in 1870 an Augmentation Fund to supplement the stipends of the more inadequately remunerated ministers; it sponsored in 1876 an Annuity Fund for ministers, on the grounds that a central denominational scheme could handle more effectively the situation created by the growing movement of ministers from one part of the country to another; in 1882 the Union took over the work formerly done by the Home Missionary Society and the Baptist Irish Society; and, in the spring of 1887, a few months before the Downgrade Controversy, the Union established a Board of Introduction to advise churches needing pastors and pastors seeking churches. The Union found itself committed, perhaps not unwillingly, to ever-extending responsibilities towards Baptist ministers and Baptist churches. Conversely, ministers and churches became more and more dependent upon the Baptist Union and, therefore, were less and less likely to rock the Union boat in times of crisis.

One other fact deserves to be mentioned. Because the Union from its outset was a union of churches whose order was congregational, it is not surprising that it disclaimed, in the words of the 1813 constitution, 'all manner of superiority and superintendence over the churches; or any authority or power, to impose anything upon their faith and practice'.

Modern Thought

At the same time there were taking place developments in the fields of science and theology which were to have devastating results. The nineteenth century was

a time of spectacular advances in many spheres of knowledge, when, in the name of progress and in an attempt to harmonise the teaching of Scripture within the alleged findings of science, the Higher Criticism movement called into question the interpretation and inspiration of the Word of God. Along with attacks on the inspiration of the Scriptures went another attack on other central doctrines. A leading Congregational minister, R W Dale, declared against the doctrine of eternal punishment, expressing a preference for the theory of annihilation. He argued that the experience of saving faith in Christ could be known without subscribing to the doctrine of his deity. Samuel Cox, a Nottingham Baptist minister and editor of THE EXPOSITOR until 1884, fervently propagated the doctrine of the ultimate salvation of all men. In some quarters the Biblical doctrine of the atonement as penal, as substitutionary and as a propitiation, was branded as immoral and unnecessary. The book of Genesis and its account of origins was under attack following Darwin's ORIGIN OF SPECIES (1859) and THE DESCENT OF MAN (1870). Everything was in the melting pot, or, as THE CHRISTIAN WORLD, (no friend to Biblical truth), expressed it:

We are now at the parting of the ways, and the younger ministers especially must decide whether or not they 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

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The new mood was well summed up by Alexander MacKenna, the chairman of the autumn session of the Congregational Union in 1887, when he distinguished between *dogma* as a final statement and *doctrine* which is always progressing! According to MacKenna, Congregationalists rejected dogma, but retained doctrine. Sadly, the same could be said of some of Spurgeon's fellow Baptists. From 1883 Spurgeon made active representations from behind the scenes against these alarming developments. He did not attend meetings of the Union after 1882 and, although frequently invited to preach at its gatherings or at those of the Baptist Missionary Society, he, in his own words, 'declined to take a public part in the meetings because I could not feel sure that I would not be compromised thereby'. Each year the secretaries of the Union and of the Mission heard his complaints. However, it was not until 1887 that matters came to a head.

Sounding the Alarm

Contemporaries had no idea that the articles in THE SWORD AND TROWEL were intended to apply in any way to the prevailing situation in the Baptist denomination. However, they were left in no doubt once Spurgeon himself entered the lists with an article in the August edition under the heading *Another Word Concerning the Down Grade*:

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 once delivered to the saints expect us to call them brethren, and maintain a confederacy with them . . . It now becomes a serious question that those who abide by the faith once delivered to the saints should fraternize with those who have turned aside to another gospel. Christian love has its claims, and divisions are to be shunned as grievous evils; but how far are we justified in being in a confederacy with those who are departing from the truth? . . . It is one thing to overleap all boundaries of denominational restriction for the truth's sake . . . It is quite another policy to subordinate the maintenance of truth to denominational prosperity and unity.¹⁰

Spurgeon continued to sound an alarm. In the September issue, he again spelt out clearly what was at stake.

A chasm is opening between the men who believe their Bibles and the men who are prepared for an advance upon Scripture. Inspiration and speculation cannot long abide in peace. Compromise there can be none. We cannot hold the inspiration of the Word, and yet reject it; we cannot believe in the atonement and deny it; we cannot hold the doctrine of the fall and yet talk of the evolution of spiritual life from human nature; we cannot recognize the punishment of the impenitent and yet indulge the 'larger hope'. One way or another we must go.¹¹

But still the validity of Spurgeon's charges was denied. So, once again, Spurgeon returned to the fight, expressing surprise that, 'In many quarters the main question has been, not "How can we remove this evil?" but, "Is there any evil to remove?"'¹². Spurgeon saw clearly that the all-important question was, 'Are brethren who remain orthodox prepared to endorse such sentiments by remaining in union with those who hold and teach them?' Spurgeon had no doubt as to the answer: 'To us it appears that there are many things upon which compromise is possible, but there are others in which it would be an act of treason to pretend fellowship. 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.'¹³

Why He Resigned

Despite Spurgeon's warnings, as delegates travelled to Sheffield for the autumn meetings of the Baptist Union, 'the great joke was the Downgrade. It did not seem to be treated very seriously'.¹⁴ Whatever his fellow ministers might think, to Spurgeon the matter was no joke, a fact which was brought home when, on 28th October 1887, Spurgeon sent to Dr Booth his letter of resignation from the Baptist Union. If any further explanation of his action was needed, it was given in the November issue of THE SWORD AND TROWEL. While readily acknowledging the right of Christians to unite in unions, he pointed out that:

a union of churches ostensibly committed to the biblical gospel ought not to contain within its ranks those whose clearly held beliefs were at variance with

the faith once delivered to the saints. We have before us the wretched spectacle of professedly orthodox Christians publicly avowing their union with those who deny the faith, scarcely concealing their contempt for those who cannot be guilty of such gross disloyalty to Christ. To be very plain, we are unable to call these things Christian Unions, they begin to look like Confederacies in Evil . . . It is lawful to unite with all sorts of men for good and benevolent and necessary purposes, even as at a fire, Pagan and Papist and Protestant may each one hand on the buckets and in a sinking ship, heathen and Christian alike are bound to take their turns at the pumps. But the case before us is that of a distinctly religious communion, a professed fellowship in Christ. Is this to be made so wide that those who contradict each other on vital points may yet pretend to be at one? . . . It is our solemn conviction 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.**¹⁵

Spurgeon could no longer be ignored or laughed at. His resignation from the Union forced its Council, into action. The problem facing the Union was expressed, in possibly an over-simplified way, in the UNITARIAN HERALD on 11th November: 'The authorities of the Baptist denomination are perfectly well aware of what is taking place; and powerful as the name of Mr Spurgeon has always been among them, they know that they must not take his side against the younger men who have the spirit of the age with them . . . **The big man must go; the big man is nothing before the march of the spirit of the age.**'¹⁶

(To be continued)

References

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- 4 E A Payne, THE BAPTIST UNION: A SHORT HISTORY, p 24
- 5 *ibid*, p 61
- 6 *ibid*, p 109
- 7 *ibid*, p 24
- 8 *ibid*, p 25
- 9 Quoted by Spurgeon in TSAT, October 1887
- 10 TSAT, August 1887
- 11 TSAT, September 1887
- 12 TSAT, October 1887
- 13 *ibid*
- 14 THE FREEMAN, 7 October 1887
- 15 TSAT, November 1887
- 16 UNITARIAN HERALD, 11 November 1887

David Boorman MA, BLit is an elder in Ebenezer Baptist Church, Swansea
