
The Big Man Must Go! (Part Two)

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The first part of this article, published in Issue no 29, traced the Denominational Changes and Modern Thought which formed the background to Spurgeon's resignation from the Baptist Union in 1887.

If the UNITARIAN HERALD was adamant that "the big man must go", the Baptist Union, through its Council, felt that efforts should be made to persuade Spurgeon to stay. To accept his resignation raised the very real possibility of alienating the considerable body of evangelicals still existing within the Union's ranks. Nor was declining Spurgeon's resignation without its difficulties since such action could be interpreted as an acceptance of the charges which Spurgeon had made. That the Baptist Union did not founder on either Scylla or Charybdis owed much to its secretary, Samuel Booth, of whom it was said,

"An even keel" was a phrase that in these times of stress and storm was frequently on his lips, and no man of all the ship's crew strove more earnestly to live up to all that the phrase involved. A more masterful, or even an abler man, might easily have wrecked or crippled the vessel, which, under Dr Booth's captaincy was at length steered into calmer seas.¹

The Union Council

Before the Council met on 13th December 1887 its officers and a small group of ex-presidents had met and agreed on a statement, drawn up by Dr Angus, Principal of Regent's Park College, affirming confidence in the evangelical loyalty of the denomination - an affirmation which missed the point completely since Spurgeon had not labelled the majority of his fellow Baptists as unorthodox and heretical. His argument with the Union arose from the fact that nothing was being done about the minority who were departing openly from the faith.

Asked at the Council meeting if Spurgeon had made any private remonstrances to them, the Union's officers gave the incredible reply that 'in no conversation or communication they had had with Mr Spurgeon had he formulated any charges as to laxity of doctrine in the Union which would have justified an appeal to the Council'.² Without doubt Spurgeon had made representations by word of mouth and in writing. However, Booth refused to allow Spurgeon to produce the correspondence between them on the grounds that it was confidential! In the circumstances it was not surprising that James Spurgeon, who was a member of the Council, should have to listen to another member remark, 'I call his brother to witness that I do not impugn the veracity of Mr Spurgeon. I think he believes he has done the thing he has not done...'³

Despite Spurgeon's request that the Council should not send 'anyone to ask for a reconciliation', it was decided that Doctors Booth, Clifford, Culross and Maclaren should seek a meeting with Spurgeon to consider 'how the unity of our denomination in truth and love and good works may be maintained'.⁴ The deputation (with the exception of Maclaren) met Spurgeon on 13th January 1888. Spurgeon refused to withdraw his resignation and declined to name the men in the denomination who were departing from the faith since he believed that the Union had no power under its constitution for 'dealing with the utmost divergence of doctrinal opinion'.⁵ Five days later the Council accepted Spurgeon's resignation. At the same time it adopted the following resolution which, once it became known, was strongly resented by Spurgeon and his friends:

That the Council recognizes the gravity of the charges which Mr Spurgeon has brought against the Union previous to and 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 declined to give the names of those to whom he intended them to apply, and the evidence supporting them, those charges in the judgment of the Council, ought not to have been made.⁶

By now, some of the Council's members were beginning to regard the sending of the delegation as at worst 'a farce' and, at best, as 'one of love's blunders'.⁷ In an attempt 'to preserve the facade of denominational unity',⁸ Angus moved a revised draft of the declaration of the previous December at the Council meeting of 21st February. However, since in Ernest Payne's words, 'many Baptists had become deeply suspicious of doctrinal statements and creeds, if used as tests of orthodoxy or membership', the proposal ran into stormy waters. It was only carried by prefacing the declaration with the following preamble:

First - That the doctrinal beliefs of the Union are and must be determined by the doctrinal beliefs of the churches and Associations of which the Union is composed. Secondly, that the Council of the Union therefore disclaims altogether any authority to formulate a new and additional standard of theological belief as a bond of union to which assent shall be required.¹⁰

If the BAPTIST MAGAZINE was optimistic as to the outcome of the Council's decision, Spurgeon was not, remarking in a letter to Booth on 2nd March, 'The Preamble gives (the Declaration) another meaning altogether. It is an historical document but it is not a basis of union as I had recommended.'¹¹ Spurgeon was pressing for the sort of doctrinal basis which would be a real means of finding out the respective numbers of those standing for the old faith and those advocating the new, one which would not allow men to 'say one thing and mean another', one which would give an unequivocal answer to the question, 'Is the Union an assemblage of evangelical churches, or is it an indiscriminate collection of communities practising immersion?'¹²

The Union Assembly

It now looked as though there would be a momentous struggle when the Baptist Union Assembly met on 23rd April. Writing in the April *WORD AND TROWEL* Spurgeon viewed the forthcoming meeting with pessimism: the Union, while not wanting to turn down the demand that it should declare its faith, 'balances sentences, discusses everything except the main question, and proffers a base imitation of a declaration in lieu of that which is sought from it'.¹³ A few days before the Assembly the Council met to agree the wording of the Declaration which was to be proposed for adoption, agreeing at the eleventh hour to drop Clifford's preamble.

The historic meeting was held at the City Temple where, besides ministers and delegates, there were about 600 visitors. Spurgeon was a notable absentee. 'The whole place was crammed and in tumult', wrote one journalist. 'The battle at the Temple doors will go down in history in conjunction with the truce inside.'¹⁴ The Council's resolutions relating to the resignation of Spurgeon were accepted unchallenged while the Declaration, moved by Charles Williams and seconded by James Spurgeon, was approved by an overwhelming majority of 2000 to seven! As far as many delegates were concerned, the vote was one of overwhelming support for 'the gospel'. James Spurgeon hailed it as a 'great victory', conveniently ignoring the fact that, in moving the resolution, Williams had quoted Tennyson in favour of a liberal theology and justification of doubt, and that he himself, in seconding the motion, had found it necessary to stress that he was in no way endorsing Williams' remarks!

What, then, was this remarkable Declaration which found such ready acceptance with men who were divided among themselves on the great centralities of the Christian faith?

'The following facts and doctrines are commonly believed by the Churches of the Union:

1. The Divine Inspiration and Authority of the Holy Scriptures as the supreme and sufficient rule of our faith and practice: and the right and duty of individual judgment in the interpretation of it.
2. The fallen and sinful state of man.
3. The Deity, the Incarnation, the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His Sacrificial and Mediatorial Work.
4. Justification by Faith - a faith that works by love and produces holiness.
5. The Work of the Holy Spirit in the conversion of sinners, and in the sanctification of all who believe.
6. The Resurrection, the Judgment at the Last Day, according to the words of our Lord in Matthew xxv.46.'

To the last point was added a footnote: 'It should be stated, as an historical fact, that there have been brethren in the Union, working cordially with it, who, whilst reverently bowing to the authority of Holy Scripture, and rejecting dogmas of Purgatory and Universalism, have not held the common interpretation of these words of our Lord.'¹⁵

At first sight the Declaration, without its footnote, appears inoffensive. But, on closer reading, its weaknesses are soon apparent. Spurgeon went to the heart

of the matter when he wrote, 'Does everybody understand it in the same sense as everybody else? Does not the whole virtue of the thing lie in its pleasing both sides a little? And is not this the vice and condemnation of it?'¹⁶ Whereas the situation cried out for an unequivocal credal commitment, all that was provided was a historical statement which neither bound nor condemned anyone. And then, of course, the footnote recognised the existence within the Union's ranks of those who entertained the 'larger hope'. Seemingly, such men were to be tolerated and not disciplined for their heresy.

Spurgeon's view of the situation was far removed from that of his brother. 'I believe we are hopelessly sold. I feel heartbroken.'¹⁷ Addressing the annual Conference of the Pastors' College, he had this to say about the Declaration:

'Without intensely hearty belief of the truth, these precious documents are wretched affairs. Declarations of the kind I refer to may be compared to flags, which may be useful if carried by brave standard bearers; or they may be tawdry ornaments, used for meaner ends. A teacher was once instructing a class in patriotism and nationality. He happened to see the national flag hanging upon the wall, and he asked a child, "Now, my boy, what is that flag?" "It is the English flag, sir." "And what is the use of it?" The truthful boy replied, "It is used to cover the dirty place in the wall behind it." I need not interpret the parable. Let modern ecclesiastical history point the parallel.'¹⁸

Warning Notes

Such then was the course traced by what Ernest Payne has called 'the most serious crisis in the history of the Union'. What warning notes does the Downgrade Controversy sound to the Christian church one hundred years later? Among many, two may be highlighted.

1. Although, as Christians, we are not to engage in controversy for controversy's sake, there is an inescapable Biblical imperative to 'contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints'. There may be circumstantials over which, in charity, we agree to differ among ourselves but there is also such a corpus as the 'common faith' which does not admit of different interpretations. When that is under attack, we are not to withdraw quietly from the battle or to watch from the wings but, rather, are to spring to truth's defence. The fact that we shall be misunderstood, misrepresented and even maligned is not to deter us in the least. Dr John Clifford was right when he wrote in the PALL MALL GAZETTE in February 1888:

All readers of Mr Spurgeon's article will have noticed its martial tone. It is a shrill summons to war. The sword is out of its scabbard, and the scabbard thrown away. Christendom is invited to gaze on a widely-ranging contest. Already the conflict has begun; churches, associations, as well as the Assembly of the Baptist Union, are to be turned into battlefields for the continuance of the fight.¹⁹

Was Clifford being incredibly naive when, later in the same article, he exclaimed:

Oh! it pains me unspeakably to see this eminent "winner of souls" rousing the energies of thousands of Christians to engage in personal wrangling and strife, instead of inspiring them, as he might, to sustained and heroic effort to carry the good news of God's Gospel to our fellow-countrymen! Would it were possible even now to reverse the direction of those newly quickened forces and to guide them into the application of Christianity to the lessening of the sin and misery of our race!²⁰

Whatever else Spurgeon was engaged in, it certainly was not 'personal wrangling and strife'. There was no remedy for man's sin and misery other than that provided in the gospel which Spurgeon saw to be under attack. Where the glory of the Saviour, the purity of the gospel and the salvation of sinners were at stake Spurgeon could do no other than raise his voice in protest at what was happening within the ranks of the Baptist Union. Neutrality or silence were no more options for him than they are for us.

Another great evil is the want of decision for the truth among truly good men, those who are our brethren in the faith of our Lord Jesus... Neutrals, in the end, have the respect of neither party, and assuredly they are the *difficulty* in every controversy. In the churches there will always be trouble so long as men are afraid to denounce sin and error. A negro preacher in a certain village said that among his flock he carefully abstained from preaching against the sin of stealing chickens, because it seemed so much to damp brotherly fellowship....Brethren, we want grace to say, "I can be poor; I can be ridiculed; I can be abused; but I cannot be false to my Lord".²¹

2. Not only are we to contend for the truth but also we are to separate ourselves from error. Two principles to which Spurgeon adhered consistently through the Downgrade Controversy were:

'For Christians to be linked in association with ministers who do not preach the gospel of Christ is to incur moral guilt.'

*'It is error which breaks the unity of churches, and to remain in a denominational alignment which condones error is to support schism.'*²²

The advocates of an 'in to win' policy are not a late twentieth century phenomenon. There were plenty of them in Spurgeon's day. Such men shared his concern but regretted his decision to leave the Union, arguing that his influence for good would have been greater had he remained within the ranks. In a sermon preached in 1891 Spurgeon considered possible excuses which Daniel's three companions might have given for submitting to Nebuchadnezzar and keeping out of the fiery furnace. They could have argued, 'We can do more good by living'; death would 'cut short our opportunities of usefulness'. Spurgeon remarked;

Ah, my dear brethren! there are many that are deceived by this method of reasoning. They remain where conscience tells them they ought not to be, because, they say, they are more useful than they would be if they went without the camp. This is doing evil that good may come, and can never be tolerated by an enlightened conscience. If an act of sin would increase my usefulness tenfold, I have no right to do it; and if an act of righteousness would appear likely to destroy all my apparent usefulness, I am yet to do it.

It is yours and mine to do the right though the heavens fall, and follow the command of Christ whatever the consequences may be.²³

The truth of God cannot be compromised. It is impossible to come to some form of accommodation, in the name of 'unity', with those who depart from the historic faith.

We who have had the gospel passed to us by martyr hands dare not trifle with it, nor sit by and hear it denied by traitors, who pretend to love it, but inwardly abhor every line of it.... Look you, sirs, there are ages yet to come. If the Lord does not speedily appear, there will come another generation, and another, and all these generations will be tainted and injured if we are not faithful to God and to His truth today. We have come to a turning point in the road. If we turn to the right, mayhap our children and our children's children will go that way; but if we turn to the left, generations yet unborn will curse our names for having been unfaithful to God and to His Word.²⁴

References

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- 5 *ibid*, p 136
- 6 *ibid*
- 7 FREEMAN, 10th February 1888
- 8 Graham Harrison, *Spurgeon and the Downgrade Controversy (in DIVISIONS AND DISSENSIONS, Westminster Conference 1987)*, p 114
- 9 Payne, *op cit*, p 137
- 10 *ibid*, p 138
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- 13 SWORD AND TROWEL, 1888, p 249
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- 15 *ibid*, p 271
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