
Spurgeon and Evangelical Unity

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On the first Sunday mornings in January 1865 and 1866 Spurgeon preached on the theme of Christian unity. His texts, both given to him by a Church of England clergyman, were Eph 4:3 and John 17:20-21, and the titles of the sermons were *True unity promoted*, and *Unity in Christ*. Taken together with his article in the *Sword and Trowel* (October 1886) on *Unity and how not to promote it*, they are a useful exposition of his thinking on this important subject. After expounding the word “they” in John 17, he then used the following illustration:

Carnal minds hear that Jesus is to wear a crown of pearls; they find pearls in shells, they try to join the oyster shells together, and what a strange thing they make! But Jesus will have no union of the shells, the shells must be struck off as worthless things; the jewels and the jewels only are to be joined together . . . The one Church of God, of what is it composed then? Is it composed of the Church of England, the Congregational Union, the Wesleyan Conference, and the Baptist body? No, it is not. Is not then the Church of England a part of the Church of Christ, and the Baptist denomination a part? NO; I deny that these bodies, as such, unrefined and in the gross, are a part of the great unity for which Jesus prayed; but there are believers united with the Church of England who are a part of the body of Christ, and there are believers in all denominations of Christians, ay! and many in no visible church at all, who are in Christ Jesus, and consequently in the great unity. The Church of England is not a part of Christ’s true body, nor any other denomination as such; the spiritual unity is made up of spiritual men, separated, picked out, cleared away from all the mass with which they happen to be united.¹

Evangelical unity, therefore, is the unity of all true believers, in Christ. It is a given unity of those who share the same nature and have the same origin, the same strength, the same aim, the same Spirit. The God who is life, and light, and love has given them His nature; therefore they are united with Him and with each other spiritually, doctrinally and experimentally. “This unity of the Spirit has for its pillars, among other things, the witnessing of spiritually enlightened saints to the one faith which God has revealed in His Word”. There is a unity “in judgement upon all vital matters”, and “among true saints the points of union even in matters of judgement are ninety-nine, and the points of differences are only as one”.

Having defined the **nature of unity** in this way, he then proceeded to draw out a number of implications. Six were negative, and six positive.

Negative Implications

1. Evangelical unity was not an ecclesiastical unity, the unity of a denomination. Spurgeon disliked using the word *Church* for a denomination, and said “There is nothing in Scripture which says, Endeavouring to keep up your ecclesiastical arrangements for centralisation”.

2. Nor was it uniformity. Just as in nature there is variety, so there is in the Church. "The same, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, we rejoice to recognise; but as to uniformity of dress, liturgical verbiage, or form of worship, I find nothing of it in Scripture".
3. Nor was it the imposition on others of a monolithic organisational unity, like Roman Catholicism, which he called "the unity of evil, the unity of superstition, the unity of spiritual tyranny, the unity of error, of false doctrine, of priestcraft". There is unity, he said, in an iceberg, and in a plague of locusts. "I pray God evermore to preserve us from a unity in which truth shall be considered valueless, in which principle gives place to policy, in which the noble and masculine virtues which adorn the Christian hero are to be supplemented by an effeminate affectation of piety".
4. Nor did evangelical unity mean refusing to denounce error or even to separate from it. Spurgeon believed that true believers might well be found within bodies like the Roman Catholic Church or within Anglo Catholicism. He said that he loved George Herbert from his very soul because he loved the Lord Jesus Christ, but "I hate his High Churchism". A true believer within the Roman Catholic Church was like a flower on a dung heap, or a pearl within a shell. You esteem the flower and the pearl, but hate the dung heap and the shell.
5. Nor did evangelical unity mean rejecting distinctive convictions over secondary matters. Spurgeon was a convinced Calvinist and a committed Baptist, and was unashamed to say so. Indeed, he believed Arminianism and paedo-baptism to be wrong. "I trust it will be our privilege to show in our own persons, some of us, how sternly we can dissent and yet love, how truly be Nonconformists to our brethren's error, and yet in our very nonconformity prove our affection to them, and to our common Master". Genuine Christians, he said, may not have been born on the mountains of Bethel or baptized in the waters of Meribah, but whilst always pursuing unity in essentials they were also prepared to disagree charitably over other matters.
6. Nor was evangelical unity going to be helped or encouraged if one Church thought of itself in terms of superiority or infallibility. Spurgeon resented the Church State connection of the Church of England and opposed the way in which Dissenters had to pay tithes, were excluded from Oxford and Cambridge (before 1871), and suffered from other civil disabilities. But it was not only the Church England that might be guilty of a haughty spirit. A Baptist might be equally guilty of asserting that his church alone was the true church.

Positive Implications

1. The unity of true believers transcends both time and space. It is a catholicity in time and space. Therefore when a believer reads Luther, Calvin, or Juan de Valdes he discovers "the same life in each - they have been quickened by the same spirit, and made to live by the same energy; and though they knew it not, they were still one". Or again: "We, brethren, are divided many thousands of miles from the saints in Australia, America, and the South Sea, but loving as brethren, we feel the unity of the spirit".
2. True unity transcends denominational distinctives. Spurgeon spoke eloquently about this, both as something already felt but also something to be pursued:
It will be a blessed thing when all the Churches walk together in the unity of the Spirit, when this Church, although it has been baptized into the Lord Jesus Christ and laments the neglect of that ordinance by others, yet feels that the unity of the Spirit

is not to be broken, and holds out its right hand to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity; when yonder Church, governed by its elders, feels a unity with another Church which is presided over by its bishop; when a certain Church, which holds with mutual edification and no ministry, is yet not quarrelsome towards those who love the ministry of the Word; when, in fact, we have agreed in this one thing, that we will search the Word independently and act out according to our light what we find to be true; but having so done, we will keep the unity of spirit in the bond of peace . . . Let us really aid and not oppress each other; let us mingle in prayer; let us unite in confession of sin; let us join heartily in reforming our errors, and a true Evangelical Alliance will cover our land. If any Church will take the Bible as its standard, and in the power of the Spirit of God preach the name of Jesus, there are thousands of us who will rejoice to give the right hand of fellowship with a hearty greeting to all such, and we are every day striving to get other Churches and ourselves more and more into that condition in which, while holding our own, we can yet keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

3. Unity must be expressed, and if it is genuine it will be expressed in a number of ways: in doctrinal agreement, in experimental soul dealings with God, in brotherly love, in the fellowship of prayer, in the singing of God's praise, in the preaching of the Word (even if the preacher is wearing that "white rag") and in working together against the common enemy and for the common truth.

4. This given unity of true believers has to be kept and maintained. That is no easy thing to do because sins such as pride and envy and anger, and even virtues such as boldness and watchfulness, may break it; and the devil is always on hand to mar it. Spurgeon was sufficiently self-aware to be able to say: "I am not, when I join a Christian Church, to say, I am quite certain I shall never break its unity. I am to suspect myself of a liability to that evil, and I am to watch with all diligence that I keep the unity of the Spirit". Particularly important to the maintaining of unity is believing the truth of God and conforming our views and sentiments to the teaching of God's Word. I have already told you that unity in error is unity in ruin. We want unity in the truth of God through the Spirit of God. This let us seek after; let us live near to Christ, for this is the best way of promoting unity.

Divisions in churches never begin with those full of love to the Saviour. Cold hearts, unholy lives, inconsistent actions, neglected duties, these are the seeds which sow schisms in the body; but he who lives near to Jesus, wears his likeness and copies his example, will be, wherever he goes, a sacred bond, a holy link to bind the Church more closely than ever before. And in order to keep this unity God had provided the bond of peace. To realise that we are fellow citizens, and friends, and brethren, and members of the same body, is the way to be bonded together. That is how peace operates in practice.

5. The necessity for the Holy Spirit to pour His life into the hearts of believers. "The unity of the Spirit is preserved, then, by the Holy Ghost infusing daily life floods into the one mystical body; and in proportion as the life floods become more strong, that union becomes more manifest. Let a spirit of prayer be poured out on all our Churches, conventionalities will be dashed down, divisions will be forgotten, and, locked in each others arms, the people of God will show to the world that they are one in Christ Jesus".

6. Although at present we do not see this unity in its completeness, one day we will. Only God, the Architect of the building, has the complete plans before Him. He alone sees

the harmony and symmetry of the whole. Only God understands the apparent muddle of a thousand factory wheels spinning in different directions. One day He will reveal it all to us, when the unity will be complete. Until then, the responsibility of believers is to promote it by winning souls to Christ. "Every soul that believes in Christ is built into the great gospel unity in its measure, and you will never see the Church as a whole while there is one soul left unsaved for whom the Saviour shed His precious blood". . . "Do not sit down and scheme and plot and plan how this denomination may melt into the other; you leave that alone. Your business now is to go and tell to sinners round what a dear Saviour you have found".

Unity in Practice

These, then, were Spurgeon's convictions in 1865 and 1866 on evangelical unity. The question we must now ask is, How did he seek to put them into practice? We shall look at three areas.

1. **Unity and the local church.** Spurgeon believed in the gathered church ideal; "Although myself much inclined to a Presbyterian union among our Churches, I cannot but perceive in Holy Scripture that each Church is separate and distinct from every other Church". In accordance with this conviction most of his energies were poured into the work of the London church where he ministered for some 30 years. Not only did he preach to regular congregations of 5,000 Sunday by Sunday, but he also opened an orphanage, a college for pastors, and founded over 100 churches. This was in addition to the constant outflow of printed sermons which emerged from the Tabernacle. It was an astonishing ministry at a time when Nonconformity was riding high (in 1871 50% of the population were Nonconformists); and in all that he did at the Tabernacle (including the adoption of the 1689 Baptist Confession, and, of course his insistence on a baptised membership but an open table) he was seeking to do his part in the great work of keeping the unity of the Spirit and completing the building of the universal Church by local church action.
2. **Unity and the Baptist Union.** Although Spurgeon was against a centralized denominationalism, he was a denominational man, ie he believed in Baptist distinctiveness (just as he allowed for other denominational distinctiveness). "I am a sectarian; I am not a believer in the modern Diana of unity, which some people cry up so loudly. I believe denominationalism, instead of being a blot, is one of the beauties of our Christianity. . . I believe that the Church of God and the world at large need the Baptists just now, and have always needed them". (Holden Pike, Vol 4, p 321). "I hope we shall never see the day when there will cease to be Baptists and Independents. I hold that though we are bound to love our mothers in law, we are not bound to live with them". (ibid p 199/200) Accordingly he linked himself and the Metropolitan Tabernacle to the BU as a loose alliance of like-minded churches whose original doctrinal basis and aims he approved. The BU was formed in 1813 to afford "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". Although the succinct and Calvinistic doctrinal statement of 1813 was amended in 1832 to a general reference to "the sentiments usually denominated evangelical", and although Arminians joined the Union, Spurgeon evidently felt that the BU remained an evangelical body, so he stuck with it for

many years, and preached regularly at its meetings. Likewise he committed himself to the London Baptist Association and its regular gatherings. In thus associating with other Baptist Churches of evangelical convictions he believed he was further doing his part to keep and complete the unity of the greater body of Christ as defined in the two sermons.

3. **Unity and inter-denominational co-operation.** Although a committed Calvinist and Baptist, Spurgeon, as we have seen, believed in the given unity of all true believers in Christ. In 1846 the Evangelical Alliance was formed to give expression to this unity. Its Basis of Faith was clearly evangelical, if not Calvinistic, and it became an influential voice in Britain and America for evangelical convictions trans-denominationally. Spurgeon was an active member; on occasions, too active! The rise of *Tractarianism* in the Church of England, with its emphasis on baptismal regeneration, alarmed him so much that he spoke out against it in a sermon preached on 5th June 1864. He expressed his astonishment that evangelicals could remain within a Church that not only allowed such a view but even, in his opinion, included it in its Prayer Book. The sermon, and the controversy that followed, not only shook evangelical Anglicans, it also rocked the EA. As a result Spurgeon was asked to leave, which he did. Later he rejoined and participated in a number of EA activities, notably its week of prayer, but he realised that however valuable it was as a means of expressing evangelical convictions and organising joint ventures, its usefulness in dealing with church issues was limited.

In addition to his membership of EA, Spurgeon also involved himself in other evangelical trans-denominational societies such as the Y M C A, the Colportage Association, the Bible Translation Society, the Religious Tract Society and others. He also spoke at a number of denominational and interdenominational missionary society gatherings, and, of course spoke regularly at non-Baptist evangelical churches throughout the country. He appointed a paedo-baptist, George Rogers, as chief tutor at the Pastor's College and another, Mr Charlesworth, to lead the Orphanage. In these and other ways he was seeking to give positive expression to his deep commitment to that unity found among all true believers in Christ. It was a unity based on a shared life, a revealed gospel, and a common experience. It existed as a reality and was expressed in local churches, associations of churches and trans-denominational societies.

Unity Under Threat

But the unity which Spurgeon thus preached and practised was under threat. It was under threat because the gospel and the Bible, its twin pillars, were also under threat. We must now turn to examine the *Downgrade Controversy* and its aftermath, a controversy which was to have serious implications for evangelical unity then, and whose repercussions are with us today.

The Downgrade Controversy highlighted a profound change that had taken place in 19th century church life. As the century developed a change of mood occurred. It was due to three powerful influences. **The first was evolutionary theory**, which was taken from the scientific realm and applied to other fields such as big business, education, the so-called class struggle, and, of course theology. The idea developed that there had been an evolution in human thinking about life - from the theological (God created) to the metaphysical (forces behind phenomena) to the scientific (the laws according to which things work). For many, belief in God was therefore anachronistic and unnecessary. **The second was**

philosophical. The scepticism and radicalism of the 18th century came to full flower in the thinking of people like Hegel, with his belief that Absolute Spirit was coming to self-consciousness in an evolutionary process, **the materialists**, who believed the material world to be the only real world, and **the utilitarians**, for whom the only basis for right behaviour is not God-given law but the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. What these philosophies shared in common was a denial of the transcendent God who has revealed Himself in a particular person, a particular place, a particular time, and a particular Book. **The third influence was biblical criticism.** Adopting some of the presuppositions of the philosophers and evolutionists, a number of biblical critics began to view the Bible as a human attempt to interpret religious experience. Some were more radical than others. Here in Britain the prevailing tendency was at first to adopt the critical method whilst hanging on to some semblance of orthodoxy. However towards the end of the century one belief after another was jettisoned. Firstly the doctrine of eternal punishment, was dropped. Then, a lack of emphasis on the atonement became, for some, open denial. People began to speak of the Bible as merely *containing* the Word of God, and speculation increased that God's revelation of Himself to mankind might have come through a fallible Christ and a fallible Bible.

People in the pews were often unaware of what was happening. Impressed by the new generation of decreed and scholarly preachers, they did not realise that the old theological terms were being used to mean something quite different. Nor did they always notice the significant silences in so many sermons. But Spurgeon noticed, and was bold enough to say so. A Bible man and a gospel man to his fingertips he could not and would not keep silence. He had already voiced his concern in 1855 when he had spoken of T T Lynch's pantheistic hymns as "one volcano indicative of seas of latent fire in the bosom of our Churches". Five years later he issued a similar warning when J Baldwin Brown, a Congregational minister, published his *DIVINE LIFE IN MAN*. These warning continued to be made, both in his sermons and in the *Sword and Trowel*, but in the mid 1880's he spoke out directly and openly about the *downgrading* of the Bible and the gospel in the Baptist Union. Men, previously thought of as evangelicals, had changed their minds; a new generation of broad and comprehensive ministers had occupied many pulpits; terms like *evangelical* were being used dishonestly. 'It is mere cant to cry, "We are evangelical, we are evangelical"', and yet decline to say what evangelical means. If men are really evangelical, they delight to spread as glad tidings the truths from which they take the name'.

But his response to what was happening was more than verbal. He also took action. The March and April articles in the 1887 *Sword and Trowel* (written in all probability by Robert Shindler) were followed by one in August by Spurgeon himself. Then, on 28th October 1887 he resigned from the Baptist Union. It was this action, above all, which caused the subsequent furore. A battle with words from within was one thing; but to withdraw, to resign, that was another. It was the act of separation that so many found unacceptable. Had he not broken the unity of the Baptist Union? Had he not fractured evangelical unity? Charges of serious schism were made against him. It is important to answer these charges. As we have seen, for most of his life Spurgeon was a member of the Baptist Union. He believed that such a loose alliance of Baptist churches was useful and desirable, and he was prepared to identify himself with its original evangelical doctrinal basis and its subsequent evangelical ethos. His position was comparable, in some respects, to that of evangelicals within the Church of England. But now the ethos had changed. So had the

doctrinal position. As he himself put it:

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 a fiction, and the resurrection into a myth, and yet these enemies of our faith expect us to call them brethren and maintain a confederacy with them. . . It now becomes a serious question how far those who abide by the faith once delivered to the saints should fraternize with those who have turned aside to another Gospel. Christian love has its claims, and divisions are to be shunned as grievous evils; but how far are we justified in being in confederacy with those who are departing from the truth?

When he realised that the Baptist Union had no intention of agreeing to a clear cut, unambiguous creedal statement - it produced one sufficiently vague as to allow a variety of interpretations, - and when he saw that nothing could be done to discipline heresy, he had to withdraw. A united position on baptism could not keep him within a Union in which men who denied the gospel were allowed to remain. To him it would be sinful to remain: **“Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin”**.

He took this decision not because he was sick, or cantankerous, or a psychological isolationist. On the contrary. His mind was as sharp as ever, his heart as large as ever, and his sympathies as generous as ever. The decision was taken because, before everything else, he loved God, God’s Son, God’s Word, and God’s people. He was fighting “the greatest fight in the world”. It was not a fight for Calvinism or for baptism. It was a fight for the gospel and the Bible. When it came to the crunch he took his stand with Arminians and paedo-baptists for the Bible and the gospel rather than with the Baptist Union for the unity of the denomination. The issue was very clear. Evangelical unity is unity in the truth. Where the truth is denied there can be no unity, “The first question is - Are we one in Christ? and are we obedient to the truth revealed in the Scriptures? If so, union will necessarily follow”. To defend and confirm the gospel involves fighting its enemies as well as letting it loose. Spurgeon separated from people who separated from the truth. He did so because the gospel itself was at stake. That was why he had denounced the doctrine of baptismal regeneration in 1864 - it was because the biblical doctrine of regeneration was being denied, and therefore people’s salvation was being put into jeopardy. That was why he condemned liberalism, and separated from an alliance with it in 1887 - because the Bible and the gospel were being denied, and therefore the glory of God and the salvation of mankind were being affected. It was because of his concern for real evangelical unity grounded upon evangelical truth that he did what he did.

Problems which persist

His action in separating from those who had themselves separated from the truth posed several problems. They are very much with us today.

1. His attitude to those evangelicals who remained within the Baptist Union. At the spiritual level their unity with him in Christ remained. But at the denominational level a fracture had taken place. What then should he do? He clearly believed them to be wrong, particularly when they failed to speak out against error. Some of them he described as “tame” men who shrank from their duty, “timid” people influenced by heterodoxy “towards a vacillating policy”. He spoke of his “deep regret” in having to separate from those whom he “dearly loved and heartily respected”, and expressed the hope that “if they remain, they will resolve that reform shall be carried out, the truth vindicated”. Let them fight “boldly and without flinching” for the old truths; “let them

combine and work unitedly, and persistently, year after year". But he became more and more doubtful about the possibility of reform from within, and confessed his exasperation with those who were merely temporisers. "The bounden duty of a true believer towards men who profess to be Christians, and yet deny the Word of the Lord, and reject the fundamentals of the Gospel, is to come out from among them. If it be said that efforts should be made to produce reform, we agree with that remark; but when you know that they will be useless, what is the use?"

So his attitude to his fellow evangelicals within the Baptist Union was to urge them to do everything they could to reform it, but also to condemn their compromise as sinful and to press them to withdraw into a true unity outside the Union. In the meantime he retained his fellowship with them outside the denomination and found other ways of co-operation, even though an element of strain was inevitable.

2. How to express that deeper unity in the gospel which existed among those who had separated. To come out was one thing; but where were they then to go?

Knowing how easily alliances of churches might be corrupted, and aware that creeds and trust deeds do not necessarily guarantee unity in doctrine, he was wary of a formal alliance. But he hoped for "an informal alliance among all who hold the Christianity of their fathers" and believed that it ought to emerge naturally by demand. "Utterly isolated church life would have its evils, and in true union there will be not only strength but joy. This will come in due time if it be the Lord's will". "Whether we are few or many, we can unite to help our poorer brethren, and to conserve the faith". Such a union would hopefully come about soon, and would be "a larger communion than any sect could offer. Denominational divisions sink in the presence of the truth of God".

He did not live to see anything like this happen. But in 1890 with six other brethren he did form a fraternal with a basis of faith that was evangelical, Calvinistic, and pre-millennial. The numbers increased to about 30, and they met to consult, pray, and study together. More than that he was unable to do, other than to join the Surrey and Middlesex Association of Baptists, and to continue his association with his fellow evangelicals in the trans-denominational societies.

3. How to deal with the on going division among evangelicals over the question of whether or not to separate from error. It was a problem Spurgeon could not resolve, and it grieved him that he and his fellow evangelicals could not enter into a deeper experience and expression of their God-given unity in Christ. He continued to meet with many of them on a personal level outside denominational boundaries. But at church level a barrier remained.

Therefore, realistically, there were **three things he could do**.

(a) He could continue to **protest**. The authority of the Bible and the purity of the gospel were too precious to be compromised by vague doctrinal statements or unhappy alliances. He must continue to fight the greatest fight in the world. He could help his brethren best by speaking out rather than by keeping silent.

(b) He could continue to **pray**. Since unity came from the Holy Spirit of truth and life and love, it was ultimately a spiritual matter. As he had said in a letter written to American Baptists in 1870: "I wish we all had more light, more life, and more love". Therefore, it was vitally important to pray for greater measures of the Spirit's presence so that minds could become clearer, hearts warmer, and wills stronger.

(c) He could continue to preach. He saw that the completion of the unity of the true Church could only come about as people were converted. So the best way to bring that about was to win souls. Spurgeon was above all an evangelist. He defended the gospel so that there might be a gospel to preach. It was the only antidote to the poison of sin; it was the only remedy for man's terrible plight.

In January 1859 he gave a lecture to the Y M C A in Exeter Hall. He called it: "Concerning the propagation of the Faith". We shall let him have the final word:-

In the propagating of the faith, by the turning of men's hearts to love of Christ, there is no reason why men of every sect and every name should not be engaged. The fact is that God in heaven regards not the distinctions which our bigotry would desire Him to observe. There was William Huntingdon, who was to his day exceedingly popular in this city; he preached doctrines as high as the most ultra-Calvinist could desire, and in the judgement of some he did not give sufficient prominence to the precepts of the Word, and strained doctrine beyond its proper sphere; certainly he never went to excess in practical preaching. But if any one should tell me he was not useful in the conversion of souls, I could bring persons just tottering on the borders of the grave who could declare that they owed their conversion to him. There was John Wesley, a man who went to the other extreme, and in the opinion of others was not sufficiently accurate in his sentiments, but who shall deny his usefulness? If any did so the stars of heaven would speak against them, for the Lord has given Wesley spiritual children, as many as the stars of heaven. And looking at the intermediate classes of preachers, between the doctrinal extremes of Huntingdon and Wesley, everyone of them has been useful - everyone has had his sheaves which he has carried into the garner of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was not the doctrinal system which these men preached which was blessed to the salvation of men - it was their preaching of the Cross of Christ; and they did both preach the Lord Jesus Christ as the sinner's only refuge. It was not their dealing with men's heads, else I might think either of them defective, or both, it was their dealing with men's hearts. When they preached, you saw before you men that were in earnest; and you could not help saying, "These men may make mistakes in their judgement, but they are in earnest, and I feel there is an unction with the word when they speak of Jesus". It is the uplifting of Christ on the cross which will make men useful to the souls of their fellows; and it is preaching Christ crucified every day that will render us, in the hands of God's Holy Spirit, the honoured instruments of bringing many sons to glory. (LECTURES TO YOUNG MEN, p 162-3).

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