

## THE DOWNGRADE CONTROVERSY

## A Neglected Protagonist

The Downgrade controversy arose out of a series of articles in *The Sword and the Trowel* in the spring of 1887, and affected the whole Baptist family. This magazine was the mouthpiece of C. H. Spurgeon's church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle. The articles regretted and warned against the decline of Calvinism and the embracing by late nineteenth-century Christians of rationalistic theology and the assumptions of biblical criticism. They constituted a health warning for the church, and contained allusions to unnamed Baptist ministers who remained within the fellowship of the Baptist Union, whilst clearly embracing those views which Spurgeon criticised. Reactions to the articles led to Spurgeon's resignation from the Baptist Union, and to subsequent attempts in the Council and Assembly to reconcile him and reassure the denomination.

The main theme of the first article, published in February 1887, was apostasy from evangelical truth leading to rationalism and disaster. The unsigned article was probably written by the Rev. Robert Shindler of Addlestone. (1) In five pages history was traced from 1662 into the eighteenth century and Arminianism was linked with socinianism and antinomianism, especially among the Presbyterians. 'It was felt that these facts furnish a lesson for the present times, when, as in some cases, it is all too plainly apparent that men are willing to forgo the old for the sake of the new'. (2) A brief editorial comment was appended: 'Earnest attention is requested for this paper. There is need of such a warning as this history affords. We are going downhill at breakneck speed'. (3) Earlier in the magazine a page was inserted on 'Decline of rationalism in German universities', with the comment of Spurgeon that 'We have inserted this paragraph for the special delight of those "advanced brethren" who have of late so sagely picked up what the Germans have thrown away'. (4)

The second article by Shindler (5) developed the theme of the danger of heresy among the General Baptists and the opinion 'that the majority of those who are sound ... are more or less Calvinistic in doctrine'. (6) It is significant that such warnings were being given at a time when the negotiations between the Baptist Union and the New Connexion of General Baptists were reaching a climax, with a view to the fusion of the two bodies. This was eventually accomplished in 1891. It may be that friends of Spurgeon feared the freedom, tolerance and breadth which were associated with the General Baptists.

Through the summer other articles pointed to the decline of rationalism in Germany and Holland and its prominence at Andover Theological Seminary, Massachusetts. (7) Spurgeon wrote in August: '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, the Resurrection into a myth, yet the enemies of our faith expect us to call them brethren and maintain a confederacy with them'. (8) Such doctrinal falsehood was linked with the decline of spiritual life, an appetite for questionable amusements and a weariness

of devotional meetings.

In September\* Spurgeon replied to 'sundry critics and enquirers' and in October wrote on 'the case proved'.(9) He noted 'the controversy is very wide in its range ... for our own part we are content to let a thousand personal matters pass by unheeded'.(10) He concluded, 'We cannot be expected to meet in any Union which comprehends those whose teaching is upon fundamental points exactly the reverse of that which we hold dear'.(11)

Spurgeon had always been a trenchant critic of those with whom he differed. As early as 1876 he berated the influence on nonconformity of modern culture, intellectual preaching and aesthetic values.(12) In the 1880s his individualistic trends were becoming more pronounced.(13) When he withdrew from the Baptist Union on 28th October 1887 it was the climax of a long process of alienation and disenchantment. And yet the response to the Downgrade articles in the Christian world at large was animated, forceful, divisive and pugnacious. It constituted the most serious crisis in the history of the Baptist Union.

Press response and articles on the affair abound. Yet coherent accounts are few.(14) Although the setting and chronology of the crisis are clear, the issues and personalities are bewildering.(15) It will be helpful to examine the controversy through the eyes of William Landels. He wrote a thirty-two page twopenny tract explaining his outlook on the issue.(16) He was a keen participant in the affairs of the Baptist Union, but was writing from the safe distance of Scotland and was therefore able to reflect the difference of outlook that existed between those in London and those in the provinces.

Born in Berwickshire in 1823, Landels was brought up in a Scottish Presbyterian family and was drilled in the doctrine of the Westminster Confession, and in the austere morality of that group of Christians. He was converted at a Methodist camp meeting, but became a Congregational ministerial student through reading and reflection, and embraced the teaching of Glasgow theologian, Dr James Morison.(17) Settling in a small church in Ayrshire, he had a crisis of conscience when called upon to baptize infants, and after thorough examination of the scriptures he became a Baptist. At the age of twenty-three he had thus been influenced by four denominations and always retained a catholicity of outlook. He remained for four years at Cupar in a Baptist pastorate and was renowned for a courageous outspokenness which won admiration and respect. In 1850 he began a five-year ministry in Birmingham, then in 1855 moved to London, undertaking to found a church in Regent's Park chapel, formerly known to Londoners as the Diorama. This popular place of amusement, transformed by the generosity of Sir Morton Peto, became a source of attraction for many who wanted to assess this new London preacher. Thus placed on a dangerous pinnacle, he proved of sufficient stature. A flourishing, outward-looking and generous church was founded. With Spurgeon and William Brock of Bloomsbury, Landels was instrumental in the foundation of the London Baptist Association in 1865, and in 1868 he served as the Association's president. In 1876 he became President of the Union, an office in which he affirmed beyond all doubt his

denominational loyalty, and laboured hard for the well-being of ministers through the Annuity Fund. In 1883 he moved to Edinburgh, where he continued to proclaim his favourite theme of the love of God in Christ. (18)

This neglected protagonist made three important contributions to the Downgrade affair. First, *he proposed a Motion*. On 13th December 1887 a special Baptist Union Council Meeting attempted to produce a Declaration as a basis for a healing formula. (19) It also resolved to send a deputation to meet Spurgeon. The interview did not have the desired result. (20) At a January Council meeting a Motion construed as a Vote of Censure was passed which caused hurt and resentment. (21) It was this Motion which Landels proposed. In moving the Motion, Landels was complaining about the vagueness of Spurgeon's charges, which meant that every minister in the Union was being looked at as if he were suspect in doctrine. It seemed to him as if a man who wished to wound an individual had shot into a crowd without considering how many others might be wounded or killed. Such charges demanded judicial discrimination and very wisely chosen words. In fact the whole denomination had been arraigned before Christendom as guilty. Landels was confident that a way could be found to discipline any outrageous members whose names Spurgeon suggested. As it was, the respected leaders of the Union were under suspicion. He expressed a hope that Spurgeon might admit that he had been wrong and would return to the Union; but if that were not to be, the Union must defend itself. He maintained that the bringing of such general unsubstantiated charges was unacceptable and wrong. (22) It was Landels' belief that, having accepted the resignation and indicated the censure, nothing more should be done by the Council or Assembly about this issue. Others did not agree with this strategy.

Samuel Booth Harris, (23) the secretary of the Union, wanted to heal the breach. He was happy with an historical declaration which affirmed the evangelical character of the Baptist Union; but he was unhappy with anything of a legislative character, believing that it would alter the constitution of the Union. He and Spurgeon were on intimate terms and frequently discussed their alarm at some of the doctrinal views expressed by younger members on the Baptist Union Council. He had been involved in controversy with W. E. Blomfield, (24) his assistant pastor at Elm Road, Beckenham. There was dissatisfaction with Blomfield's sermons; allegations were made that they contained frequent references to universalism, appeals to prominent opponents of evangelical doctrine and insufficient notes of warning. (25) Without consulting the church, Booth dismissed his assistant. Forty-one of his sermons were examined by a committee of three ministers (26) appointed by the London Baptist Association whose assistance had been requested by the unhappy church meeting. In November 1885 they exonerated Blomfield. He was invited to stay at Beckenham. In the history of Beckenham Baptist Church Booth is depicted as authoritarian, appointing the assistant pastor and early deacons. The church meeting rejected his authoritarianism in matters of doctrine and church politics. (27) Doctrinal witch-hunting had proved an unproductive pastime. What had failed at the level of the local church, Booth clearly could not envisage succeeding in Union debate.

The strategy of Joseph Angus, Principal of Regent's Park College, was to produce a declaration of an historical character, setting out changes in the basis of the Union since 1832, affirming confidence in the evangelical loyalty of the denomination as a whole, and specifying certain fundamental doctrinal tenets. James Spurgeon, who was closely associated with his brother's various enterprises and was regarded by many as his representative, co-operated with Angus, his former college principal, in the drawing up of the declaration. Yet he was to give notice of an intended Amendment, to be submitted to the Assembly, which included a doctrinal article 'on the resurrection and judgement of the Last Day with the eternal blessing of the righteous and the eternal punishment of the wicked'.(28) He also indicated that such a declaration could serve two purposes: 'First to show our substantial agreement with one another and with our fellow Christians on great truths of the gospel; secondly that we may work together with mutual confidence and with larger efficiency. This explanation is not for our sakes but for the truth's sake and in the interest of the churches themselves'.(29)

James Spurgeon withdrew the amendment only when a preamble suggested by John Clifford was itself withdrawn. Contemporary evidence refutes the charge that Clifford was the arch heretic in the dispute.(30) He certainly represented a very different stance from Spurgeon, and had denied the validity of most of Spurgeon's charges. His written preamble and his spoken address on the morning of the Assembly debate both emphasised that the doctrinal beliefs of the Union must be determined by those churches and Associations of which the Union is composed; and that the Union cannot therefore formulate a new and additional standard of theological belief as a bond of Union to which assent would be required. He objected to any coercion through or by creeds.(31)

Charles Williams(32) expressed in a letter his desire for unity by general appeal to the term 'evangelical' and the avoidance of both controversial doctrines and a legislative declaration. Thus these ministers wanted protection for the accused and some positive affirmation of the orthodox faith and evangelical character of those individuals and churches who made up the Baptist Union. All wanted to go beyond Landels. It was in an attempt to explain his Motion that Landels made his next contribution.

Secondly, *he wrote a pamphlet*. It was written in a vigorous and incisive style, but its tone was modest and friendly. It contained a good deal of commonsense. Landels complimented Spurgeon, speaking of his 'extraordinary abilities and great services to the cause of Christ ... the manner in which he has sustained his ministry in London for more than thirty years, preaching to the largest congregation in the world Sabbath after Sabbath, with growing rather than abating popularity; the extent to which his sermons are circulated in other countries, read in other languages as well as our own; the prominence he gives to evangelical truth, the freshness with which he illustrates it, and the force with which he applies it to the hearts and consciences of men; his great organising capacity, shown in his College and Orphanage, and various other schemes which are alike well planned and vigorously conducted. The singleness of his aim and the

consistency of his character; the spirit in which he has borne the popularity which would have turned the heads of most men - all these, and other things which need not be named here, have raised him to a height in the estimation of others to which few men attain and mark him as confessedly the greatest man in the ministry of the age'. (33)

It was because of the greatness of Spurgeon's influence that his charges against the Union needed to be taken so seriously. Landels had found that members of other denominations were taunting Baptists with their heresy on the ground of what Spurgeon had said. Landels also believed that the Union was being stampeded into an unhelpful strategy. He wished to analyse the evidence which Spurgeon adduced in support of his charges, and to grasp all the facts - a task that others, he believed, had not undertaken. Other sources show that Spurgeon's accusations caused comment in other denominations. But these published comments were mainly a justification of the soundness of the other denominations. For instance, the *Methodist Times* said: 'Our conviction is that the nonconformist churches are immeasurably more spiritual and more earnest than they were a quarter of a century ago. We hope that nobody will allow himself to be discouraged by Mr Spurgeon's sincere but mistaken Jeremiads. Our prospects are growing brighter every day'. (34) The *Church Times* lamented the fact that Protestant dissent was 'breaking away from its moorings'. It also defended the soundness of its own communion, 'since even ministers with unorthodox opinions have a most difficult position to carry on because of the creeds and other doctrinal formularies of the Church'. (35) In an address entitled 'The Christian life of today as compared with the Puritan ideal', the Rev. J. Guinness Rogers indicated that he believed Spurgeon's charge was merely that some did not believe the gospel of Calvin; it was not the gospel of Jesus Christ that was at stake. Spurgeon was only expressing the kind of talk that had been current up and down the churches among people of a certain mentality. (36) In a similar way, Dr H. R. Reynolds of Cheshunt Congregational College believed that there was no evidence of any change in the attitude of congregations to the veritable deity of the Son of God and cardinal doctrines. Dr Alexander Hanney's perusal of the Downgrade articles filled him with 'sorrow and amazement'. He frankly admitted that the type of doctrine underlining Spurgeon's own preaching was not held by the greater number of Congregational ministers; but he believed that that ministry held essential facts and doctrines in the grasp of an intelligent and masculine faith. Dr Alexander Mackennal believed that the heart of the denomination was sound but its focus of doctrine had moved from justification through Christ to life in Christ. (37)

Thus Landels was right to recognise the gravity of Spurgeon's charges and their effect on the Christian world at large. Landels then made a number of factual points. Firstly, he indicated that it was wrong to suggest that any particular newspaper should be regarded as an organ of the Baptist denomination. Secondly, he believed that it was incorrect of Spurgeon to complain that no public notice was taken of the Downgrade articles. Had he wished this to happen, he ought to have been present at the Assembly meetings of the Union, or he ought to have brought specific and substantiated charges, with appropriate names, before the Council; so that through proper procedures the

whole matter of orthodoxy might have been dealt with. Thirdly, he believed it was wrong that the Union was implicated in an address given by Edmund Gange of Bristol. Gange, (38) minister of Broadmead, Bristol, spoke at a Sheffield working men's rally, giving 'an appeal for liberty'. (39) Spurgeon interpreted it as an attack on Calvinism. Fourthly, Landels made it clear that he was not complacent. He said, 'We do not affirm preaching in our own or other denominations is all that could be desired from an evangelical point of view ... we have sometimes felt greatly dissatisfied with what we have heard ... the way to deal with the partially enlightened brother is not to reject him as a heretic but to expound to him the way of God more perfectly'. (40) He also indicated that criticism of colleges had been made - he gave a quotation from a letter about an unnamed college which 'continues to pour forth men to take charge of our churches who do not believe in any proper sense in the inspiration of scripture, who deny the vicarious sacrifice on the Cross, and hold that sinners not saved on this side of the grave can, or must be on the other'. (41) From another letter he quoted: 'I have not a large acquaintance with the state of opinion in your denomination, but groan over my own ... some of our colleges are poisoning our churches at the fountainhead - I very much fear that an unconverted ministry is multiplying'. (42)

His main stricture concerned the vagueness of the charges enshrined in phrases of Spurgeon, like 'Broad school newspapers'. Reference was made to criticism in *Work and Work*, *Christian Age*, a circular issued by the secretaries of the Evangelical Alliance, and an address by the President of the Gloucestershire and Herefordshire Association of Baptist Churches. Condemnation was made of the doctrinal stance taken by *The Nonconformist* and *The Christian World*, 'but in all these instances 'there is not a word in it in which Baptists are specially implicated'. (43) On the contrary, recent addresses by Williams and Culross, respectively past president and present president of the Union, were quoted in which 'anything more evangelically sound can scarcely be desired'. (44) Finally, Landels indicated that the Union was suffering financially and was likely to be seriously crippled if this cloud of suspicion were not lifted from it. He indicated that he believed that Spurgeon could not join another body, and would end up leading a narrow coterie of like-minded people. He pleaded that Spurgeon would see the wrongness of his procedure and have the courage to acknowledge it, and concluded by saying, 'More than about Mr Spurgeon's return to the Union, we are concerned that the Union should not forget what is due to itself, and from it to its own members. It should not forget that until an accusation is proved, it is bound to protect an accused brother'. (45) Landels claimed that his unhappiness with the anonymity and generality of Spurgeon's charges against the Union was even shared by some former Pastors' College ministers, who used expressions like 'dishonesty', 'falsehood' and 'chicanery'. They believed that it was immoral for unnamed people to be charged and found guilty without proper trial, and that the whole Union would be implicated in the accusations made by Spurgeon.

Yet if one were unhappy with Spurgeon's strategy, it would still be necessary to examine the nature of his doctrinal charges. Light is shed on this by the third of Landels' contributions. *He delivered an address.*

The address was given at the closing meeting of the autumn assembly of the Union at Huddersfield.(46) The subject was '1688 and 1888 - Bicentenary of John Bunyan's Death - the Rights and Responsibilities of Individual Conscience'. In the address Landels eulogised Bunyan because he would not sacrifice the sacred rights of conscience either to friend or foe. In a similar way, Baptists had maintained the right of private judgment, receiving no man's interpretation of God's word as an infallible truth from which it was a sin to differ. Baptist history, as compared with that of creed-bound churches, afforded ample evidence that freedom had not impaired the soundness of faith. Indeed, Landels believed that in creed-bound churches, such as the Church of England, thought had been fettered and the communion had not been preserved from error. On the contrary, he rejoiced that in the period between 1825 and 1885 great advances had been made, not beyond the word of God, but in the interpretation of that word. He suggested that there were now only a few fossilised theologians existing as relics of an almost forgotten past who did not preach the universality of Divine Love. Equally, he spoke of many who had ceased to regard the Atonement as the literal payment of a debt or a means of appeasing the divine wrath. He suggested that many had rejected the idea that men are, of divine ordination, born in a sinful condition and doomed to remain in that condition forever, because God in His sovereignty leaves them without His sovereign grace, then torments them in hell forever because they are what He intended and what He ordained them to be. Such doctrines were at first promulgated by a man who consented, if he did not require, that another should be burnt for his belief. His theology had rightly been rejected. He suggested that fellowship ought to be on the basis of loyalty to Christ and should never suffer on the interpretation of a few passages of scripture. For instance, although he himself did not believe in annihilationism or that impenitent people might be saved, he did not believe that those who expressed the doctrine of punishment in those terms were being disloyal to Christ. Thus he wanted to congratulate the Baptist Union on having maintained its liberty; principle had triumphed and the church had shown that it would not yield to the dictation of any earthly authority, however revered. It would call no man master but Christ.

Landels rejoiced that the Union had won the day. Indeed, with regard to the spring Assembly, the *Christian World* spoke of 'the virtual surrender of Spurgeon's party'.(47) The importance of the outcome had been suggested a year earlier in a letter from J. G. Greenhough to the editor of the *Christian World*(48) in which Greenhough commented on the fact that he was ignorant of the charges Spurgeon had made in the *Sword and Trowel*, because it was little read except by members of his own school. This was later rectified because Spurgeon's friends sent copies of the articles to all Baptist ministers. Greenhough also made it clear that his silence or that of his friends in the early days was a dignified response to unjustified charges. They wondered whether Spurgeon's mental irritation had arisen out of physical infirmity. He was also critical of what he called Spurgeon's 'papal pretensions' in bringing the general and unsubstantiated charges. The letter indicated points of doctrine on which Greenhough differed from conventional Calvinism. He said he did not deny vicarious atonement, but revolted from the Jewish

interpretation of that fact. He did not deny the inspiration of the scriptures, but disagreed with a mechanical theory of inspiration. He did not call in question the great sad fact of human sin and guilt, but protested against the immoral notion that man was under condemnation for a guilt and sin not his own. Above all, he did not deny the punishment of impenitent sinners, but did venture to speak of a larger hope. He believed that punishment would be for deliberate sin, for wilful violation of known law and received light, not for irresponsible ignorance or innocent misconceptions of the truth. He also believed that a Father of love and pity would always be delighted at and give ample opportunity for repentance by His sinful children. Greenhough expressed the thought that, not only did he differ from Spurgeon, but Spurgeon's antiquated expression of doctrine was actually hindering the cause of Christ by keeping many thinking people out of the faith because of the way that Christian truth was expressed. He believed that in many respects Spurgeon misunderstood and perverted the grandeur of Christ. Therefore in the letter not only were the doctrinal differences clearly set out, but the tables of accusation were turned.

The Union's Declaration in the spring of 1888 had left room for interpretation of key doctrines like those which Greenhough was espousing, yet clearly indicated an evangelical consensus that reassured the Christian world about the soundness of the Baptist Union. If one compares the Declaration with similar statements of 1812 and 1873, and with the doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Alliance which Spurgeon wanted to be adopted by the Union, two conclusions can be drawn.(49) The Baptist Union had grown progressively more open in its doctrinal statements. That of 1812 was a Particular Baptist creed, though much briefer than those of the seventeenth century. By 1873 even the phrase 'evangelical sentiments' had been dropped; only Believer's Baptism was a required unifying doctrine. In 1888 the main stress was on experience and freedom. The Evangelical Alliance statement contained what are generally understood to be evangelical views with regard to nine major doctrines, beginning with the inspiration and authority of scripture, including one on eternal blessedness and punishment, and finishing with the ministry and sacraments. The parties in the Alliance are to be those 'only as hold the stated doctrines'. It was an exclusive confession of faith. The Union Declaration was inclusive, stressing that no believer would be controlled or enquiry restricted.

Landels took Spurgeon seriously. He did not underestimate his intellect on the basis of poor health.(50) It is wrong to underestimate Spurgeon's capacity for work after 1888(51) or his continuing close friendships.(52) But that the dispute took a toll of his health is undeniable.(53) He was a sensitive man who could easily become depressed and fragile. As George Rogers put it, 'the allusions which have been made to Mr Spurgeon's occasional illness are in bad taste and are unworthy of those who have made them'.(54)

It is clear than Spurgeon had an inadequate strategy. He could look back to 1856 and say, 'College started with a definite doctrinal basis ... the creed of the College is well known, and we invite none to enter who do not accept it'.(55) When the Baptist Union Assembly was discussing the Constitution of 1873, including the phrase 'evangelical



sentiments', Spurgeon's view had been, 'If there were any vice among you it was that of everlasting splitting hairs and wasting time about nothing at all'.(56) John Briggs has declared emphatically that 'the non-credalist of 1861 had become the credalist of 1887'.(57) Certainly Spurgeon believed that as long as the spirit of an association was right, no formal creed was required. Evangelical Calvinism based on scripture and leading to fruitful mission was the basis of fellowship since the evangelical revival. By the 1880s that consensus was being undermined by biblical criticism and an appeal to religious feelings rather than sound conversion. Yet it would be wrong to suggest that Spurgeon had simply changed into a supporter of doctrinal statements. He had always valued dogmatic theological statement. When it suited him he appealed to creeds, in 1856 and 1887. On other occasions he rejected their rigidity, as with Dr Gill's books on divinity.(58) He did not enter the Downgrade controversy with the planned strategy of insisting on a doctrinal statement which was binding upon everyone. The Council of the Baptist Union had power to remove an 'obnoxious' member. The handbook list was revised from year to year and names omitted. This was clearly for moral laxity or the espousal of something like Unitarianism. The only doctrinal provision of the Constitution centred upon Believer's Baptism. Spurgeon recognised that the Union was powerless to act against individuals under its existing constitution over issues of doctrinal interpretation. His proposal of a basis of faith was a belated attempt to deal with the problem, but he placed little confidence in it.(59)

Spurgeon did not have a clear strategy. He made insufficient use of the Union machinery during the process and communicated inadequately with other leaders in the denomination. It is also plain that his language was regarded as antiquated. At the Pastors' College the conference of old students was broken up and a new one formed. Membership demanded adherence to a rigorous creed.(60) But in that creed it was specially stated that adherents were not binding themselves to the teaching of Calvin or any other uninspired man, nor was exact agreement necessary upon all disputed points of any system. What was vital was that 'We utterly abhor the idea of a new gospel or an additional revelation or a shifting rule of faith to be adapted to the ever-changing spirit of the age. In particular we assert that the notion of probation after death and the ultimate restitution of condemned spirits is so unscriptural and unprotestant, so unknown to all Baptist confessions of faith and draws with it such consequences, that we are bound to condemn it, to regard it as one with which we can hold no fellowship'.(61)

Generally, contemporary students of the College during the controversy followed Spurgeon.(62) The former students did not. Few resigned with him. A significant number of important pastors refused to conform to the new conference expression of the doctrines of grace. Some probably needed the fellowship of the Union; some failed to comprehend his intentions; many respected their mentor but felt that he was behind the times, looking back rather than forward. They respected him whilst in College, but not in the ministry. It is true that many were grieved at the vote of censure and a hundred met together to attempt a strategy of reconciliation; but even among his own supporters he did not receive the help that he anticipated. Yet if

Spurgeon's strategy was inadequate and his language anachronistic, it does need to be considered whether his discernment was not right. As George Rogers put it, 'the problem with many expressions of new theology was that the doctrines of substitution, of atonement for sin, justification by imputed righteousness, of renewing by the Holy Ghost, of salvation by grace alone, of a fixed and endless hereafter, which constitute the line of demarcation between saints and sinners and heaven and hell were virtually ignored'.(63) Glover declared, 'As to the facts, Spurgeon was clearly in the right ... his insight into the religious life of his own times was proved by subsequent events. He did stand on the eve of great theological depression. Unquestionably the theological confusion of his day and the disturbance to religious traditions wrought by higher criticism had a great deal to do with the decline of evangelicalism'.(64)

The process of twentieth-century secularisation is too complicated to be explained simply in terms of departure from puritan theology, and all leading denominations were affected in the late nineteenth century by the widespread embracing of evolutionist principles, and the freedom of enquiry which they required. Yet the Baptist Union Declaration of 1888 was very evangelical in tone; and the liberalism which dominated Congregationalism in the last decade of the nineteenth century was certainly not prevalent among Baptists. Spurgeon's language may have been extravagant;(65) he rejected language of compromise, or that which was sufficiently ambiguous to cover antagonistic beliefs.(66) The indiscriminate charges may have recalled some ministers to a clear proclamation of the gospel; it may have alerted others to the need to define what loyalty to Christ means. His call indicated to some that any fellowship needs definition and circumference; it may have clarified to others the eschatological character of the kingdom of God: the kingdom is not simply something that man can build through educational and social advance. In 1888 all around Spurgeon seemed to be rejoicing in progress. To them Spurgeon was a prophet of doom.

In his son's estimate(67) Landels regarded the popular preacher at New Park Street as lamentably narrow, when they both began their ministry in London in the 1850s. It is equally true that Spurgeon considered the young orator from Birmingham as dangerously unsound. The two men publicly disagreed over Spurgeon's interpretation of the doctrine of Election in 1859. Yet from 1863 onwards there are numerous examples of cordiality and mutual support, evidenced in letters, pulpit exchanges, days apart together, and coming to one another's aid in time of difficulty. Spurgeon was very supportive of Landels in his participation in the life and Presidency of the Baptist Union. Their common loyalty to Jesus Christ forged an effective partnership for twenty-five years. yet in the Downgrade controversy Landels was outspokenly clear in feeling that Spurgeon's charges were unsubstantiated. The Union needed to fly the flag of liberty and any kind of declaration or creed would be counter-productive and untrue to the historic principles and identity of Baptists. For Landels the Baptist badge of identity was very broad, covering many differing theological positions and espousing the General Baptist virtues of breadth and toleration. For Spurgeon the identity was much more carefully defined; yet his campaign was unclear and confused. Landels

proposed his motion to Council because Spurgeon's actions needed to be stopped. This motion demonstrated Landels as a courageous individual who was prepared to offer to the leaders of the Union a way forward which repelled the charges which Spurgeon was making and rebuked him as an individual but did not seek to justify the position of the Union. He had sufficient confidence in the evangelicalism of the Union of Churches and common trust in the leadership, to countenance standing against one of the foremost evangelical figures of the day. Landels had been active in the 1880s as one of a number of leading Baptist ministers used as missionaries among the churches, and his credentials were admired and trusted by many. Landels believed that Spurgeon had acted wrongly and needed to acknowledge that. He perceived, perhaps more clearly than most, that there was going to be a division between those who maintained a puritan stamp in late nineteenth-century Baptist life and those who might continue to adopt an evangelical label but who expressed their theological ideas in much more contemporary language, affirming the spirit and outlook of the age. His approach to Downgrade was sharp, clear cut and discriminating. His firm, clear stand paved the way for a Union victory in that battle. Subsequent events may suggest that the ongoing conflict upheld the rightness of Spurgeon's warning and vindicated his intent.

## NOTES

- 1 J. C. Carlile, *C. H. Spurgeon, An Interpretative Biography*, 1933, p.245. Shindler was also thought to be the author by *The Christian World*, 28 February 1888, p.141. Robert Shindler entered the ministry in 1851, moved to Addlestone, Surrey, in 1884, and died in Forest Hill, 12 March 1903, aged 80. Hymnology was his favourite subject and he contributed extensively to religious papers and magazines. *Baptist Handbook* 1888, p.116.
- 2 *The Sword and the Trowel*, 1887, p.126.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.122.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.18.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp.166-172.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp.174-5; 274-9.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.379.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp.461-5; 509-15.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.509.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p.515.
- 12 *The Sword and the Trowel*, January 1876.
- 13 For example, unlike many Nonconformists, he supported voluntarism in education as long as it was practicable and Chamberlain's policy of opposing Home Rule for Ireland. He differed from Joseph Parker on matters of belief and behaviour. W. Y. Fullerton, *C. H. Spurgeon*, 1920, pp.298-301.
- 14 There are detailed accounts in the works of Carlile and Fullerton. There is a polemical account by Iain Murray called *the Forgotten Spurgeon*, 1956. Sir James Marchant has written the story from the viewpoint of Clifford and a former colleague, Dr Watkins, which is now lost. There is a brief section in A. C. Underwood's *A History of the English Baptists*, 1947, pp.229-232; and in Willis B. Glover's *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century*, 1954. The fullest accounts have been written by Ernest A. Payne. One is in chapter 7 of *The Baptist Union: A Short History*, 1958, based on an unpublished account deposited in Baptist Church House. A later article paying special attention to

the evidence of contemporary letters appeared in the *Baptist Quarterly*, October 1979, pp.146-158. The most recent account is by P. Kruppa, *Charles Haddon Spurgeon, A Preacher's Progress*, 1982 chapter 8.

- 15 There is an outline of events in *The Freeman*, 20 April 1888, pp.251-5.
- 16 The pamphlet was called 'The Rev. C. H. Spurgeon and the Baptist Union'. Landels, then in Edinburgh, wrote, 'The objection which everyone has a right to offer to him is that we are left in utter ignorance of the men to whom the charges apply. And it is this vagueness which renders impossible the disproof which Mr Spurgeon demands', p.12.
- 17 The Morisonians took their name from the Rev. James Morison who led a movement in Scotland in the 1840s towards an abandonment of moderate Calvinism in favour of Arminianism in which he espoused the doctrines of universal atonement, universal and resistable grace of the Holy Spirit, conditional election and limited fore-ordination. He emphasised the moral nature of the influences of the Holy Spirit and the simplicity of faith which by means of its object brings peace to the conscience and purity to the heart. Such teaching was influential right through until the 1880s, during which he was awarded a D.D. degree for his work and an inevitable enlargement of the Christian doctrine of hope in line with the Universal emphasis of the other features of his theology. Cf. H. Escott, *A History of Scottish Congregationalism*, 1960.
- 18 Memoir, *Baptist Handbook*, 1900, pp.224-228 and T. D. Landels, *William Landels D.D. A Memoir*, 1900.
- 19 The meeting was attended by 80 members out of a possible 106: 79 of those were ministers and 27 laymen. Ten of the ministers were trained at the Pastors' College. The chief architect of the Declaration was Joseph Angus.
- 20 The deputation was the idea of Samuel Vincent of Plymouth and not the leaders of the Council. The Union representatives were Culross, Clifford and Booth; McLaren was unable to participate through ill-health. They met Spurgeon and his brother at the Metropolitan Tabernacle on 13 January 1888. Spurgeon made three things clear: (1) he wanted the Union to adopt the Evangelical Alliance basis of faith; (2) even if they did, he would wait and see how it worked; (3) he declined to name brethren and stated that the Union had no machinery to discipline them.
- 21 The motion read: 'That the Council recognises 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 declines to give the 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' (see Marchant, op.cit. p.160). This was incorporated into the Council Report and passed without dissent by the Assembly.
- 22 *The Baptist*, 2 March 1888.
- 23 Samuel Harris Booth, born in London 1824, trained at Stepney where he was deeply influenced by Dr Benjamin Davies. His first

- breakdown in health came after four years in his first pastorate at Birkenhead. He moved to Falmouth, but after the death of his wife there he returned to Birkenhead in 1856. His denominational work made him well-known and in 1866 he moved to Holloway Road, London. He was Secretary of the Baptist Union 1877-9 (joint), 1888-93 (sole), and involved in founding Elm Road, Beckenham, 1883-5. In 1874 he had to take lighter work in Roehampton and in 1877 left the pastorate to become Secretary of the Baptist Union, a post he held until ill-health and increasing attacks of paralysis necessitated his final resignation in 1892. He died in 1902. *Baptist Handbook* 1903, pp.196-200.
- 24 William Ernest Blomfield, born in Essex in 1862, studied at Regent's Park under Dr Angus, took a London University B.A. and entered his first church at Elm Road, Beckenham, at the age of 22 as Assistant to the inaugurating Minister, Samuel Booth. In 1886 he went to Ipswich, then Coventry, and finally became Principal of Rawdon College 1904-26. He died in 1934. *Baptist Handbook* 1935, pp.310-3. See also C. Binfield, *Pastors and People: the biography of a Baptist Church at Queen's Road Coventry*, 1984.
- 25 A transcript of the minutes of the Elm Road Church.
- 26 The Committee consisted of Dr E. B. Underhill, Secretary of the B.M.S. 1849-76; Dr J. W. Todd, pastor of Brown Street Baptist Church, Salisbury; and Rev. J. R. Wood of Upper Holloway.
- 27 L. W. J. Phillips and R. J. Gardiner, *A Solid Building - An Open Fellowship: A History of Beckenham Baptist Church (Elm Road Chapel) 1883-1983*, 1983.
- 28 J. A. Spurgeon's 'Notice of Amendment to the Report embodying the Declaration passed on 21 February 1888 to be proposed at the Spring Session'. (Spurgeon's College Archives)
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Spurgeon said, 'You are a General Baptist and you hold your own views: you and I understand one another' (Fullerton, p.315). W. B. Nicoll: 'I can testify from conversation with Mr Spurgeon during the Downgrade Controversy that he declined to rank Dr Clifford among the heretics. He spoke with warm admiration of Dr Clifford's fine character and believed that on various points of controversy he was misunderstood', C. T. Bateman, *John Clifford*, 1904, p.15.
- 31 Letter from Clifford to Cuff, 1888, cited by Payne, BQ 28, p.156.
- 32 Charles Williams, 1827-1907, had a very long ministry in Accrington and was keen to bring General Baptists fully into the life of the Union. *Baptist Handbook* 1908, pp.495-8; cf. J. H. Lea, 'Charles Williams of Accrington 1827-1907', BQ 23, 1969.
- 33 Landels, *op.cit.*, pp.6-7.
- 34 *The Methodist Times*, quoted in *The Christian World*, 8 September 1887.
- 35 *The Church Times*, 12 August 1887.
- 36 *The Nonconformist and Independent*, 1 December 1887.
- 37 *The Christian World*, 20 October 1887.
- 38 Edwin Gorsuch Gange, born in London in 1844, was early influenced towards the ministry by C. H. Spurgeon. After an outstanding first pastorate at Portsmouth, he moved to Broadmead, Bristol for 24 years, during which the church had to be enlarged and crowded Sunday afternoon services were instigated. In 1893 he returned to London to Regent's Park for ten years and was President of the

- Union in 1897. He died in 1921. *Baptist Handbook* 1922, p.264.
- 39 E. A. Payne, BQ 28, 1979, p.153.
- 40 Landels, pp.4-6. 41 *Ibid.*, p.13.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p.14. 43 *Ibid.*, p.15.
- 44 *Ibid.*, pp.23-7. 45 *Ibid.*, p.31.
- 46 *The Freeman*, 12 October 1888.
- 47 *The Christian World*, 26 April 1888.
- 48 *The Christian World*, 8 September 1887.
- 49 Payne, *The Baptist Union*, p.271.
- 50 Many historians are agreed that he was a sick man. It is generally assumed that he had gout and later died from nephritis or Bright's disease of the kidneys. Medical opinion confirms that neither condition produces mental disturbance or senility (see E. Hayden, *A Centennial History of Spurgeon's Tabernacle*, 1962, p.70).
- 51 Between 1889 and 1892 he was engaged on nine books and delivered over 200 printed sermons.
- 52 In April 1890 he preached to 'an assembly of ministers of the Gospel'. he still met with his own College Evangelical Association (see *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 1891, pp.37, 373). Hayden says 'he had many intimate friends' (p.71), but in a letter of 29 September 1888 to Mr Wiglett he says: 'I rejoice in your faithfulness. Many have forsaken me... error seems in the air and a soil of idiotic craving for silly amusements'.
- 53 'Undoubtedly the Downgrade Controversy helped to bring about his death at the comparatively early age of 57' (Publisher's note to *The Early Years*, p.471).
- 54 A letter to *The Baptist*, 30 September 1887.
- 55 What the doctrinal basis was is unclear. There is no record. It may have been the Westminster Confession of Faith or the basis of the Evangelical Alliance. Or it may have consisted of Spurgeon's unwritten understanding of the phrase 'The doctrines of grace, coupled with a firm belief in human responsibility', *The Sword and the Trowel*, 1881, p.301.
- 56 *The Freeman*, 20 April 1888, p.252.
- 57 BQ 31, 1986, p.231. 58 *Ibid.*, p.252.
- 59 'There is no use in blaming the Union for harbouring errors of the extremist kind, for, so far as we can see, it is powerless to help itself, if it even wished to do so. Those who originally founded it made it 'without form and void' and so it must remain'. *The Sword and the Trowel*, 1887, p.560.
- 60 'We, as a body of men, believe in "the doctrines of grace" - what are popularly styled Calvinistic views. We feel that we could not receive into this our union any who do not unfeignedly believe that salvation is all of the free grace of God from first to last, and is not according to human merit, but by the undeserved favour of God. We believe in the eternal purpose of the Father, the finished redemption of the Son, and the effectual work of the Holy Ghost'. (Minutes of College Conference).
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 *The Sword and the Trowel*, 1888, pp.317-20.
- 63 *The Baptist*, 30 September 1887.
- 64 Glover, pp.166-7. Alexander MacKenna, the Congregationalist, 'admitted Spurgeon's charges were true' (*ibid.*, p.175) and J. W. Grant said, 'Had it been possible to foresee the beliefs of the next generation, it is likely that a great number would have

- shared Mr Spurgeon's apprehensions' (J. W. Grant, *Free Churchmanship in England 1870-1940*, n.d. p.68). W. C. Johnson points out that the actual statistical decline of the London Baptist Association started in 1908, but even by 1925 the membership figure was only 106 lower (*Encounter in London*, 1965, p.46).
- 65 At an Evangelical Alliance meeting Spurgeon spoke on Galatians 1.6-9 and was clearly accusing his opponents of preaching 'another gospel' which, according to Paul, was to be roundly condemned. *The Baptist*, 2 March 1888, p.29.
- 66 *Ibid*, p.2.
- 67 Thomas D. Landels, *William Landels D.D. A Memoir*, 1900.

MICHAEL NICHOLLS, *Vice-Principal of Spurgeon's College*

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## SPURGEON'S OPPONENTS

### IN THE DOWNGRADE CONTROVERSY

The dramatic finale of the Downgrade Controversy is the picture that most readily comes to mind when one's thoughts are drawn to that episode in Baptist history: the floor of the City Temple crowded with Baptist Union delegates, the gallery packed with visitors, some of the most distinguished names in Nonconformity among them; all awaiting a debate that promised to reduce the denominational organisation to shreds. As three o'clock approached, the members of the Baptist Union Council filed in, hardly leaving time for an excited murmur to spread through the ranks of assembled reporters before the meeting was called to order. According to the prior arrangement it was Charles Williams who stood up to propose the motion. It only required his announcement that J. A. Spurgeon would be the seconder for the momentous news to be conveyed to all corners of the building: a compromise had been agreed at the last moment and the unity of the Baptist Union was to be preserved. The response was loud and prolonged applause.(1)

Ever since that time perception of the controversy as a whole has been built up around this picture, summarised as the successful foiling of a bid by C. H. Spurgeon to divide the Baptist Union. But working backwards from the end to the beginning is suspect methodologically, and for this reason it is intended that the present article should concentrate on the first two phases of the controversy. For it is possible to divide it into three parts: from August to November 1887, when Spurgeon's 'Downgrade' articles appeared in *The Sword and the Trowel*, sparking it off; from November 1887 to February 1888, when Spurgeon's resignation from the Baptist Union altered its emphasis and increased its intensity and complexity; and finally February to April 1888, when attention was centred on confrontation and eventual compromise over the formulation of doctrinal declarations. In this discussion of each of the first two phases there is a central point. For