

Charles Haddon Spurgeon and the Downgrade Controversy

By Erroll Hulse

<http://africanpastorsconference.com>

Through the constant republication of his sermons and voluminous writings (135 books) the influence of Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) maintains an immense spiritual influence throughout the evangelical world. Over half a million visits have been made to [The Spurgeon Archives](#), probably the best of [several Spurgeon websites](#). The last five years of Spurgeon's life, 1887-1892 were troubled and saddened by the Downgrade Controversy. Spurgeon carried an enormous workload. He possessed neither the time nor the energy to pursue and remedy the widespread doctrinal decline in the B U (Baptist Union). For any leader to appraise so great an issue would involve full-time work for more than one astute theologian. For his unwillingness to provide documentation concerning his allegations CHS was misunderstood and maligned. The controversy exacerbated his health problems. He admitted at one stage that the controversy was killing him.

A preliminary comment is needful with respect to the Baptist Union. There are many Baptist denominations around the world and they differ widely in character. In South Africa the battle over liberal theology was won in the 1920s so the B U of South Africa is evangelical and has managed to remain intact and resist soul-destroying liberal doctrines. As an introduction to Spurgeon I recommend Iain Murray's book [The Forgotten Spurgeon](#) published by the Banner of Truth.

The Theological Background

The Downgrade controversy broke out when Spurgeon observed aggressive promotion of the 'new thought' and blatant denials of evangelical belief affecting the Baptist denomination. Calvinism, which had been the theology of both Congregationalists and Baptists, had faded away. It remained embedded in their confessional statements and in the trust deeds of hundreds of churches but not in the hearts and minds of the ministers and people. The old truths were not being attacked. They were simply ignored. This was not the case in Scotland where Reformed theology was expounded and promoted especially by well-known theologians such as Cunningham, Smeaton, Buchanan and Bannerman.

The emphasis in the churches was on evangelism, missions and practical social work. Doctrine was taken for granted and its importance minimised. Willis B Glover, in his book [Evangelical Non-Conformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century](#), traces out the effects of the decline of Calvinism in preparing the way for the widespread acceptance of higher criticism which undermines faith in the Bible. With the decline of Calvinism as a coherent well-knit body of truth, natural thinking and the standpoint of higher criticism found little resistance. - The

decline of Calvinism led to a theological vacuum. R W Dale wrote in *The Congregationalist* 1877, 'We have no theological system of the Puritans of the 16th and 17th century'.²

An essential part of orthodox doctrine is the truth that the impenitent will be subjected to the eternal punishment of God. With the lack of clarity this truth was undermined in three ways: 1. The teaching of conditional immortality, 2. The idea of a future probation, and 3. The universal salvation of all creation. A congregational minister, by name Edward White, taught from his pulpit and in his church magazine that those who do not believe will be annihilated. He acknowledged that Spurgeon was the most effective block to the advance of his ideas.³

In the absence of clear doctrinal foundations the moral influence theory of the atonement became very popular to the extent that Christ's substitutionary atonement and the biblical teaching that Christ's death propitiated God's wrath was opposed as immoral!

With increasing evidences of heterodoxy in his own and other denominations it is not surprising that Spurgeon called this a 'downgrade' and protested in the hope that reformation might be implemented to arrest the decline.

The Baptist Union

The doctrinal basis of the B U when it was founded in 1813 consisted of a voluntary association of Particular Baptist churches. The theological foundation of this Union was emphatically Calvinistic asserting original sin, eternal and personal election, particular redemption, free justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ, efficacious grace in regeneration, the final perseverance of real believers, the resurrection of the dead, the future judgement, the eternal happiness of the righteous, and the eternal misery of such as die in impenitence.'

In 1832 the Constitution of the Union was changed in order to allow the entrance of churches of the New Connection which were Arminian in theology. In lieu of a robust Confession of Faith all that was required now was assent to agreement 'in the sentiments usually denominated evangelical'. Reference to Calvinistic doctrine would have killed stone dead the prospect of the entrance of the Arminian churches of the New Connection. It is clear that from 1832 onwards the B U possessed no clear doctrinal foundation. Nevertheless as a body it achieved a great deal in encouraging the strong churches to assist weaker ones and to help poor pastors in the rural churches. Spurgeon was not hostile to working both with General (Arminian) and Particular Baptists and was one of the founders of London Baptist Association which from 1865 onwards drew together both General and Particular Baptist churches in harmonious fellowship. He was also very active in church planting in new population centres and is believed, by the end of his life, to have been instrumental in planting about 200 churches.

In 1873 to the disquiet of Spurgeon and others the word 'evangelical' was dropped. It was proposed that believers' baptism by immersion provided a better a stronger doctrinal basis than 'evangelical sentiments.'

Administration of the B U consisted of one hundred elected representatives. Spurgeon was never a member of this body and in the Downgrade he dealt with the Council through his brother James. Samuel Harris Booth was the permanent paid full-time secretary of the Council for two periods, 1877-9 and 1883-98. Booth and CHS were friends and Booth shared the doctrines and sympathies of CHS. Yet when it really mattered in the Downgrade he was ambivalent and placed the interests of the Union above doctrinal issues raised by CHS. Spurgeon's disquiet over the state of affairs began before 1887. Whereas he had been a popular speaker for the B U and the Baptist Missionary Society, from 1883 onwards he declined all invitations to preach for those bodies. From 1883 CHS made his disquiet about decline in doctrine and spiritual standards known. His taking up these issues in his magazine the *Sword and Trowel* was not a bolt out of the blue. The claim of B U leaders that his charges were sudden and unsubstantiated reflect badly upon their integrity.

The Initiation of the Downgrade Controversy

In March and April two articles of about six pages each appeared in the *Sword and Trowel* entitled *The Down Grade (article 1 and article 2)*.⁴ These two well researched unsigned articles were written by Robert Shindler, pastor of Addletone Baptist Church, Surrey. Shindler had trained for the ministry at Spurgeon's own Pastor's College.

The first article described the defection from Calvinism of eighteenth century non-conformists. The first and only intimation in the March issue of deep concern in Spurgeon's mind is found in a small print footnote which read, 'Earnest attention is requested for this paper. There is need of such warning as this history affords. We are going down hill at break-neck speed.'

The second article by Shindler attacked Arminianism among dissenters describing it as 'a cold, dry and lifeless system, and its effects upon the heart have been commonly weak and spiritless', Arminianism among the General Baptists Shindler declared to be 'the common road to Arianism and Socinianism'. In the second article Shindler exposed the weakness of Dr Doddridge the famous hymnwriter and principal of a theological academy who by his insipid leadership. This compromise allowed heresy to advance unchecked which led eventually to the closure of that institution. Shindler maintained that in proportion to which any party recedes from Calvinism veneration for the Scriptures is diminished.'

Spurgeon had much more than a footnote in the second article. As editor of the *Sword and Trowel* he contributed half a page of comments. He affirmed his approval of Shindler's contention that Arminianism was usually the route down which dissenters had travelled downward to Socinianism. He affirmed that his main concern was for vital truth, 'We care far more for the central evangelical truths than we do for Calvinism as a system; but we believe that Calvinism has in it a conservative force which helps to hold men to the vital truth, and therefore we are sorry to see any quitting it who once accepted it.'

E B Underhill, a prominent member of the B U Council, said he read the two articles with keen approval, but he had no idea that they were intended to apply in any way to the Baptist

denomination. The articles were too general to be understood as an indictment of any contemporary body of Christians.

The Downgrade controversy would not have progressed had not Spurgeon published a four page article in the August 1887 issue of the *Sword and Trowel* titled [*Another Word Concerning the Down-Grade*](#). This was written like a manifesto with ringing clarity. Since this article marks the real beginning of the Downgrade it is necessary to make as accurate a synopsis as we can of Spurgeon's opening salvo:

'From the Press of the Broad School of Dissent, What doctrine remains to be abandoned? What other truth to be the object of contempt? A new religion has been initiated, which is no more Christianity than chalk to cheese; and this religion, being destitute of moral honesty, palms itself off as the old faith with slight improvements, and on this plea usurps pulpits which were erected for gospel preaching. The atonement is scouted, the inspiration of Scripture is derided, the Holy spirit is degraded into an influence, the punishment of sin is turned into fiction, and the resurrection into a myth, and yet these enemies of our faith expect us to call them brethren, and maintain a confederacy with them!'⁵-

'Germany was made unbelieving by her preachers, and England is following in her track. The consequences of preaching 'another gospel' in the form of 'modern thought' was catastrophic. 'In meeting-houses holding 1,000 or 1,200, or 1,500 places once packed to the ceiling with ardent hearers, how small are the numbers now! We would mention instances, but we forbear. The places which the gospel filled the new nonsense has emptied, and will keep empty.'⁶-

Here the downward spiral into modernism is described. What was the remedy? There was none! The only action that could be taken was to withdraw from thieves and robbers and regroup. How far are we justified in being in confederacy with those who are departing from the truth? 'We fear it is hopeless ever to form a society which can keep out men base enough to profess one thing and believe another', but it might be possible to make an informal alliance among all who hold the Christianity of their fathers. Spurgeon concluded with a call to die fighting. 'If for a while evangelicals are doomed to go down, let them die fighting, and in the full assurance that their gospel will have a resurrection when the inventions of 'modern thought shall be burned up with fire unquenchable.'⁷-

In a five page second article [*Our Reply to Sundry Critics and Enquirers*](#), Spurgeon answered those who pressed him for names and details to support his contentions about the Downgrade. He answered by pointing out that it was a matter of principle to stand for the truth in face of the most blatant attacks made upon it upon it by Broad School newspapers. He lamented the fact that no one had come forward to refute his charge that prayer meetings were in decline or that certain ministers frequent theatres.- He made a further charge that 'Some of our colleges are poisoning the churches at the fountains. I very much fear that an unconverted ministry is multiplying.' Men continue to pour forth to take charge of our churches who do not believe, in any proper sense, in the inspiration of the Scriptures, who deny the vicarious sacrifice on the Cross, and hold that, if sinners are not saved on this side⁸ of the grave, they may, can, or must be on the other. And the worst of it is, the people love it.'⁹-

A seven page third article by Spurgeon appeared in the October issue of the *Sword and Trowel* with the title [The Case Proved](#). In this CHS pointed to the blatant propagation of modernism by the paper *The Christian World*. This paper gloried in its denials of Scripture as teaching that which was strictly immoral namely the doctrine of everlasting punishment and the imputing of guilt or righteousness. The paper poured scorn on verbal inspiration and the idea of the Trinity. Resolutely CHS reaffirmed his determination not to name names which would lead to a wrangle.—

Immediately after the publication of the above-described articles the B U autumn meetings were held in Sheffield. The B U ignored Spurgeon's protests. However two speakers made sarcastic remarks about Spurgeon's articles. A paper called *The Freeman* reported that 'the great joke' on the way to Sheffield was the Downgrade question. On October 28^t, 1887, CHS wrote to Dr Booth to register his withdrawal from the B U. He intimated that his reasons for the resignation would appear in the November issue of the *Sword and Trowel*. As promised he stated his case clearly and expounded the view that love without truth is no basis for Christian unity. 'It is lawful for good and benevolent and necessary purposes to unite with others. Pagan, Papist and Protestant may each one hand on a bucket in fighting a fire but in preaching Christ it is not possible to unite with those who call the fall a fable, who deny the personality of the Holy Spirit, who call justification by faith immoral, and who hold that there is another probation after death, and a future restitution for the lost.'—

The Climax of the Downgrade Controversy

It was during December that CHS wrote to Booth to say that he felt that he must now hand over to the Council the letters which had passed between them and which had contained specific charges against certain unorthodox ministers. This would have cleared Spurgeon of the charge that his criticisms were nebulous. Booth however replied that his correspondence with CHS was confidential and not official and CHS could not honourably use it.

Many believe that the well-being of Christ's churches was a far more important issue than Booth's politics and that Spurgeon should have ignored Booth and published the correspondence. However CHS was magnanimous enough not to do so and was consequently exposed to the charge of being a liar. After his death Mrs Spurgeon opted to destroy the correspondence and thus 'to conceal under a generous silence most of the documentary and other evidence which could be produced to prove the perfect uprightness, veracity and fidelity of my dear husband throughout the whole of the solemn protest.'—

The Council of the B U met in December 1887, eighty of the hundred members being present. It was urged that a deputation visit Spurgeon. Four doctors of divinity, Culross, Clifford, Booth and Maclaren were delegated to meet with Spurgeon travelling if necessary to Mentone in France. CHS discouraged such a move and said he would meet the delegation when he returned. Drs. Culross, Clifford and Booth met him at the Tabernacle on 13 January 1888. Spurgeon refused to

withdraw his resignation and refused to name names. He could not see that the Union had the power to deal with heterodox views.

Spurgeon urged the adoption by the Union of a doctrinal basis similar to that of the Evangelical Alliance. It is important to note that CHS always conceded the limitations of credal statements. He maintained with the utmost clarity that the very essence of declaring truth involves definition. He ridiculed the shallowness of the maxim ‘our creed is the Bible!’ The point is interpretation. What does the Bible mean?¹³— But no one was more aware than CHS of the fact that when it comes to application within a denomination creeds can be ignored by those who wish to avoid their implications.

The Council met again on January 18. As A C Underwood stated it, ‘Clifford and his supporters (Alexander Maclaren and Charles Williams) were in a difficult position. They had themselves rejected the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture and were well aware that one distinguished Baptist minister, Samuel Cox, had made himself one of the best known and ablest exponents of universal restoration.¹⁴— The Council passed a resolution accepting CHS’ resignation and adding, ‘the Council recognises the gravity of the charges which Mr Spurgeon has brought against the Union -- its 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 judgment of the Council ought not to have been made’.¹⁵—

The crucial drama of the Downgrade took place at the B U Assembly which met in April 1888 at the City Temple in London under the presidency of Dr John Clifford. The church was crammed to capacity. A declaratory statement of facts and principles commonly believed by churches in the Union was set before the Assembly for acceptance or rejection. It set out six doctrines ‘commonly believed’. They were, 1. The divine inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures, 2. the fallen and sinful state of man, 3. the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, 4. Justification by Faith, 5. the work of the Holy Spirit, and 6. the resurrection and the judgment at the last day, ‘according to the words of our Lord in Matthew 24:46’. This statement is so general in character that it is capable of widely different interpretations. The phrase ‘justification by faith’ has the word ‘alone’ omitted. There is no mention of the substitutionary atonement of Christ or the virgin birth.

Charles Williams, an advocate of advanced theology and hostile to Spurgeon, proposed the resolution. He made it quite clear that he defended liberal theology and that he repudiated Spurgeon’s protests. James Spurgeon who did not share the conservative theological position of his brother and who supported the Union distanced himself from Williams’ speech but nevertheless seconded the resolution. The Assembly understood this resolution as a vote against Spurgeon.

Rev Henry Oakley described the scene vividly. Those present understood that the passing of the motion was censure of CHS. The chairman called for a show of hands for the motion of censure. A forest of hands went up. “Against”, called the chairman. Oakley testified that he did not see

any hands but history records that were *seven*. Without any announcement of numbers the vast assembly broke into tumultuous cheering, and cheering and cheering yet. From some of the older men their pent-up hostility found vent; from many of the younger men wild resistance to any ‘obscurantist trammels’, as they said, broke loose. It was a strange scene. I viewed it almost in tears. I stood near a ‘Spurgeon’s man’ whom I knew very well. Mr Spurgeon had welcomed him from a very low position. He went almost wild with delight at this censure of his great and generous master. I say it was a strange scene, that that vast assembly should be so outrageously delighted at the condemnation of the greatest, noblest and the grandest leader of their faith.—¹⁶

It was reported that the vote was 2,000 to 7 against CHS. This majority was regarded as a condemnation of Spurgeon for raising insubstantial issues and making charges that should never have been made.

In the February issue of the *Sword and Trowel* Spurgeon wrote a three page commentary on the B U censure. He affirmed the reality that even if he provided evidence of heterodoxy which could expose him to law-suits, the Union, except for the doctrine of believers’ baptism by immersion, had no standard that could be administered. He expressed his resentment of the insincerity of the deputation that had visited him on the basis of deliberation about unity when political expediency had motivated them from first to last.

The B U leaders out-manoeuvred Spurgeon. In his article ‘New Evidence’ on the Downgrade controversy Mark Hopkins reveals that there was intense activity and political manoeuvring among the leaders of the B U following Spurgeon’s resignation.—¹⁷ The character of the Council’s deliberations were political in character whereas Spurgeon was spiritual in his demeanour resorting not to scheming but to the encouragement of prayer and prayer meetings.

Assessment - the Role of John Clifford

In order to get to the heart of the B U view of the Downgrade it is necessary to understand the mind of John Clifford who epitomises the mentality of most the leaders of the Union. Samuel Harris Booth the acting secretary resigned from his church because he disagreed with the theology of his minister. He had shared with Spurgeon his concerns about the decline but when the chips were down he was a Union man to the core and the interests of the denomination prevailed.

Dr. Clifford became vice-president of the B U in 1887, and President in 1888: and for various reasons had frequently to take the President’s place during the year of his vice-presidency. This dynamic, complex figure was therefore leader of the Baptist body during the eventful “Downgrade” controversial years; and Sir James Marchant leaves his readers in no doubt as to the extent of his influence upon their counsels. He brought to their discussions the widest tolerance of the views against which Spurgeon protested; they were to him no more than the necessary ‘adjustment of theological belief.’ His ideas of doctrinal soundness were so flexible and so optimistic that at the very moment when Modernism was daily increasing its hold on the Baptist ministry he declared that in his opinion it was ‘sounder than it had been for the last twenty or

thirty years'. In the midst of the controversy he led the Union to draw up a declaration of general Baptist beliefs, which as we have seen was so general in its character that it could easily accommodate liberals. Clifford led the meeting which declared, by 2,000 votes to 7, that the Baptist body was evangelical to the core. It was through his powerful personality that this delusion overcame the assembly. Henceforth the Baptist denomination was committed to the principle that there could be the widest departure from the older evangelical faith without the least charge of heterodoxy being laid against it.

John Clifford was a man of extraordinary energy and administrative efficiency. He had great vision for unity and progress and became nationally famous. His portrait hangs in the national gallery. It will help us to know something of his background. John Clifford was born at Sawley, a village nine miles from Derby, on October 16, 1836. He came of Puritan stock, his father being an upright, somewhat severe Calvinist and Chartist, his mother a woman of prayer, who remained a gentle memory to her son throughout his long life. The father's method of awakening his son, frail as he was in his younger days, was to lift him from his bed at four o'clock in the morning and stand his bare feet on the cold plaster floor. Clifford's boyhood was cast in the period of incredible barbarism in the employment of child-labour. He commenced work between five and six in the morning and was not set free until between seven and eight at night. His task was one requiring unremitting attention, the piecing together of broken threads in spinning and weaving. "I began life in a factory" he wrote in later years "and I have never forgotten the cruel impression I received of men and work."

Clifford's conversion took place in a Baptist prayer-meeting, when, as he relates, "the beautiful simplicity of God's marvellous plan of salvation appeared clear to my vision; I grasped the hand of the Father, led thither by Jesus Christ." In due course he began to preach with such acceptance that in 1855 he entered the Midland Baptist College to be trained in the regular ministry. While there he was brought into contact with influences which began to shape his later theological bent. The secretary of the College introduced him to his brother, Thomas Goadby, who became Principal of the College after Clifford left, and who was strongly of the modernist school. "It is interesting to note," says Sir James Marchant "in view of Clifford's later attitude toward modern theological thought -- that he made long notes of Principal Goadby's conversation concerning the urgent necessity for the readjustment of theological belief." Yet he was greatly impressed by Spurgeon's presentation of the gospel. "I was one of a group that travelled from Leicester to Wellingborough to see, hear, and study the new planet that had appeared in the Free Church heaven," he says. "Where lay the secret of his amazing power? Was it his doctrine? Hardly, for that was only fresh in that it blended most daringly teachings that theologians had set over one against another. Spurgeon, in the sermons of that day, was half Calvinist and half Arminian. Was it his voice? All agreed that it was an organ of exquisite sweetness and strength, and that his mastery over it, however acquired, was unquestionably complete. It was always musical and never harsh, not even in its loudest tones, and in its quietest and lowest modulations always easily heard. Was it his fine and faultless elocution, his felicitous choice of language, his clear, logical arrangement of his material? No, it was in his transparent and dominating purpose to bring men to God by the gospel of Christ that his strength lay... In a living, burning, reality in a preaching of the gospel with tremendous force, was the secret of his power. So completely was I absorbed in what he said that I had to postpone all consideration of how he said it fill the sermon

was ended”; and although at a crucial moment he became Spurgeon's greatest opponent, he remained his friend and admirer all his life.

John Clifford imbibed liberal theology in the eclectic style by which I mean that he viewed widely differing theological standpoints as all having something of value to offer. He was preoccupied with the interests and progress of the B U and viewed Spurgeon’s allegations as a distraction. Clifford was not in sympathy with contentions based on credal ideas. With his liberal presuppositions he sincerely viewed Spurgeon’s allegations as misguided.

Was Spurgeon Correct in his Alarm, or was he a Scaremonger?

Subsequent to the Downgrade controversy modernism continued to pervade Bible seminaries and theological institutions. All the main line denominations in Britain have been engulfed by modernism. Spurgeon was correct in his view that such a movement would empty the churches. The outcome has been catastrophic as is documented in Michael Watts, *Why did the English stop going to Church?*¹⁸— The Baptists in the late 19th century numbered over 500,000 whereas they are about 150,000 today.

How far did Spurgeon correctly perceive the loosening of evangelical commitment amongst Baptist members and how much did he perceive the new learning as pervading the leadership and the ranks of the B U? This difficult question is traced out in detail by John Briggs.¹⁹— Graham Harrison names the names that Spurgeon refused to name because he said that the Union had no power to discipline. Harrison names S W Green and G P Gould, at Regent’s Park College, T G Rooke and William Medley at Rawdon, T Witton Davies at Haverfordwest, Thomas Goadby at the Midland College, James Thew of Leicester; not to mention names like W E Bromfield, J G Greenhough, John Clifford, and Alexander Maclaren.²⁰—

Harrison also names Richard Glover of Bristol, whose son Terrot Reaveley Glover disparaged Spurgeon in vitriolic fashion in *The Times* in 1932 as follows: ‘Spurgeon had an “untrained mind without the discipline of ordered study,” that he “prepared young men for the Baptist ministry in a rather amateur way”; that “little busts and cheap prints of him were in thousands of small homes” that less famous men “possessed a wider intellectual range an outlook,” and that in the failure of his protest “obscurantism” sustained its greatest defeat.’²¹— The inconsistency and questionable taste of Dr. Glover's article were pointed out to him by E J Poole-Connor, but he returned no reply. Glover also elicited a strongly worded protest from the Rev. Tydeman Chilvers, one of Spurgeon’s successors as pastor at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, to which *The Times* gave prominence.

Spurgeon’s knowledge of decline in Baptist ranks was much more detailed than we might think, a matter illustrated by the fact that he knew that some of the men trained in his own College had become unorthodox. As a result he re-organised the College Conference which hitherto every graduate of the College had a right to attend. The old Conference was dissolved and a new one formed with a clear declaration of faith as the basis for association. Of 496 members of the

former Conference 432 agreed to the new basis and were formed into the Pastors' College Evangelical Association. The College remained outside the B U until 1938.

The Case for the B U.

The B U was involved in a great program of church planting and the encouragement of missionary endeavour. Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle was the largest church on earth. With it was arrayed over sixty different agencies. Allied to the Metropolitan Tabernacle at Elephant and Castle was the East London Tabernacle, a church of 4,500 led by Archibald Brown, and reputed to be the second largest congregation in Britain and in the world. Archibald Brown followed Spurgeon out of the Union. Isolation in huge churches like these two in central London was not a problem. But the isolation of the majority of Baptist churches was a major difficulty and a very real threat to their survival. This is illustrated by the events of 1970 when a leading Baptist seminarian Michael Taylor publicly denied the deity of Christ. This led to a protest led by an MP, Cyril Black and the well known theologian Beasley Murray who, when the Union refused to disciple Taylor, resigned from the Union and subsequently left Britain to live in America. About a hundred ministers with their churches resigned from the Union at that time but most of these discovered they could not survive on their own and rejoined the Union. Many of those which continued in isolation declined and ceased to exist. Others have survived including the Leeds Reformed Baptist church where I am involved as an associate pastor. We have grown steadily to about 170 members and associate with the International Fellowship of Reformed Baptists and with the annual Carey Conference for ministers.

The East London Tabernacle, a multi-racial church, today has two pastors and about 150 members. This church went back into the B U under the leadership of D H Moore in 1920 but came out again in 1992 when the church affiliated as member of the FIEC (Fellowship of Independent Baptist Churches). Both the Metropolitan Tabernacle and the East London Tabernacle were demolished by Nazi bombs during the war. Both churches have a lively evangelistic ministry in London today and both subscribe to the reformed faith. Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle remained outside the B U until 1955. It withdrew again in 1971 and currently has a congregation of about 400.

Connectionalism is a very important factor which must be addressed by independent churches that boast of their autonomy. Isolation is not biblical and is fraught with many dangers which is why so many Baptists prefer the dangers of being inside the B U. What alternatives are there to union with a body in which modernism is fomenting? Those who are critical of the B U need to address that question.

Spurgeon and Biblical Practice

Spurgeon saw clearly that Modernism was antithetical to the gospel. He was in accord with the guidelines given in Scripture in Galatians 1:8 and 2 John 9,10. He realised the difficulty of co-operating with the leaders of the B U who were incipiently modernistic and who sincerely

believed that unity is the first priority and therefore held to the expediency of inclusivism of those who were militantly modernistic. Great Scholars like B B Warfield were soon to take up the fight and engage in a polemical warfare with modernism, the high tide of which began to wane from the 1960's onwards. Spurgeon was effective in deriding and ridiculing 'modern thought' and associating with it, 1. The decline of the prayer meeting which he called the practice of united supplication, 2. Dwindling attendances on the Lord's Day, and 3. Worldliness which in his times he saw as enthusiasm for the theatre or playhouse (in 1999 it is zeal for sporting activities in preference to attending two services on the Lord's day). CHS did not remotely possess the time to write in the meticulous style of B B Warfield and expose the roots and anti-Christian presuppositions of modernism. For instance Eta Linnemann, a German scholar, in her masterly work, [*Historical Criticism of the Bible*](#), exposes the anti-Christian mentality behind historical critical theology.²²— Linnemann, prior to her conversion, was a noted modernist scholar which equipped her well for writing her book.

Puritan Calvinism and robust evangelical theology was very much in decline and almost disappeared in England during the period 1892 to 1960. Since the 1960s a theological upgrade has taken place in England with the result that it is now possible to enjoy expository preaching in the Puritan tradition in a wide variety of Baptist churches in England. This theological renewal is traced out in detail by historian Dr Robert Oliver.²³—In the USA there is a widespread trans-denominational resurgence of Calvinism which is described by Collin Hansen in his book [*Young, Restless, Reformed*](#) published in 2008.²⁴—

Conclusion - Spurgeon and his place in history

Charles Haddon Spurgeon enjoyed many exceptional privileges. He became the foremost evangelist/pastor/preacher of the century in the English speaking world, and as far as Baptists are concerned their greatest and best exemplar. There was no one else who could have played the role of Mr Valiant for truth as did CHS in the Downgrade controversy. This was a battle in which he emerged bruised and beaten. Very few came out of the B U in support of him. Of a minority in the Union who sympathised few could afford to forego the financial advantages of belonging to the Union.

Judged in the light of subsequent history Spurgeon is a hero. He stood for principle. He left landmarks for the truth which have guided evangelicals ever since. He drew attention to what became one of the most serious assaults on the Bible and on the Christian Faith in the history of the Christian Church. Spurgeon made his stand against the rising modernism of his times, 1887 - 1992. Modernism represents the third great sustained attack of Satan on Christianity. The first battle was waged in the early centuries over the person of Christ and the Trinity. The next was the subversion of the doctrine of salvation over a number of centuries so that it was buried under a mountain of heresy. Later Luther and the Reformers recovered the doctrine of justification by faith alone. (Compromising forensic justification in favour of a fusion of justification and sanctification is the very essence of Roman Catholic thinking about salvation). The third attack was designed to destroy confidence in the Bible. This battle is far from over, even though modernistic theories have been discredited. It is correct in my view to think of CHS as one slain

on the battlefield in a battle that was lost. Battles may be lost but the war for truth will be won eventually. Spurgeon was a busy pastor/preacher/evangelist and could only draw attention to the decline in doctrinal fidelity. It was given to others to take up what he called the greatest fight in the world. Spurgeon joined a long line prophets, apostles, reformers and preachers who suffered for their faith. With eager anticipation we await the assessments of the judgement seat of Christ.

Spurgeon has come to be regarded among many more than just Baptists as the ‘tallest and broadest oak in the forest of time’ and ‘the sweetest, most silvery and far-reaching voice that published the glad tidings since apostolic times’.²⁵— It is amazing that so many in Spurgeon’s generation became deluded by higher criticism and prejudiced against Spurgeon’s call to hold unwaveringly to the great central truths of the Gospel.

1 Willis B Glover, *Evangelical Non-Conformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century*, The Independent Press, 1954

2 Cited in Glover, *ibid*, 93

3 Spurgeon Scrapbooks, VI, 56

4 All articles from the *Sword and Trowel* (S&T) relative to the Downgrade Controversy have been collated and published in a small paperback by Pilgrim Publications, Pasadena, Texas 77501

5 *Ibid*, 17

6 *Ibid*, 19

7 *Ibid*, 20

8 *Ibid*, 20

9 *Ibid*, 24

10 *Ibid*, 30

11 *Ibid*, 34

12 Carlile, *Spurgeon*, 248

13 *S&T*, *ibid*, 45

14 A C Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, 1947, 230

15 Carlile, 251

16 Ernest W. Bacon, *Spurgeon - Heir of the Puritans*, Christian Liberty Press, 1996, 139

17 Mark Hopkins, *New Evidence*, Baptist Quarterly, vol 35, number 6, April 1994

18 Dr Williams Trust, 14 Gordon Square, London WC1H OAG

19 John Briggs, *The English Baptists of the 19th Century*, Baptist Historical Society, 1994

20 Graham Harrison, *C H Spurgeon and the Downgrade Controversy*, Westminster Conference Paper, 1987

21 E J Poole Connor, *Evangelicalism in England*, FIEC, 1951, 236

22 Eta Linneman, *Historical Criticism of the Bible*, Baker, 1990

23 Robert Oliver, *A Glorious Heritage - The Recovery of the Reformed Faith in the Twentieth Century*, Evangelical Library Lecture for 1997. The Evangelical Library, 78A Chiltern Street, London, W1M 2HB. cf Erroll Hulse, *The theological Renewal 1950-2000*, *Reformation Today*, Number 162, 17-24

24 Collin Hansen *Young, Restless, Reformed*, A journalist’s journey with the new Calvinists., Crossway, 160 pages, paperback, 2008

25 B H Carroll, ‘The Death of Spurgeon,’ in *Baptists and Their Doctrines* ,

edited by Timothy and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), p. 59. Cited in Tom Nettles, THE BAPTISTS, vol 3, Christian Focus, page 14, 2007.