

Charles Spurgeon: A Faithful Soldier for the Saviour During the Downgrade Controversy

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There is a wonderful story that Charles Spurgeon was asked to preach before a large gathering of ministers and people who did not agree with him theologically. The basis of the invitation was that he not be controversial. Spurgeon agreed to speak under the proposed restriction. The moment came when Spurgeon stood before the unsympathetic audience. He announced his text, 1 Timothy 3:16. Then, with holy boldness the spiritual giant among men declared *"And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory."*

The faithfulness of Charles Haddon Spurgeon to proclaim the gospel of redeeming grace without compromise of Scriptural content or personal integrity involved him in many religious struggles, the last of which literally took his life according to his wife Susannah. During the great debate his health weakened. After his death Susannah wrote that *"his fight for the faith....cost him his life."* The details of the Downgrade Controversy are briefly restated.

In March 1887, an article appeared in *The Sword and the Trowel*, a monthly magazine Spurgeon published. Robert Shindler, the anonymous author of the article, declared that some Baptist ministers were *"denying the deity of the Son of God, renouncing faith in his atoning death."* Using vivid imagery, Shindler warned that such ministers were on a slippery slope or "Down Grade".

In the April issue of *The Sword and the Trowel*, Spurgeon commented on the article that his friend had written. *"We are glad,"* said Spurgeon, *"that the article upon 'The Down Grade' has excited notice.. Our warfare is with men who are giving up the atoning sacrifice, denying the inspiration of Holy Scripture, and casting slurs upon justification by faith."* Despite his desire to keep public attention focused upon preserving the doctrines of God's sovereign grace, there was a practical problem Spurgeon had not anticipated.

The immediate concern among the leadership of the Baptist Union after reading public assertions of Baptist ministers renouncing essential evangelical doctrines was one of identity. Who were the men inside the churches preaching false doctrine and leading God's people into eternal perdition? Where these ministers in London or elsewhere? The leadership of the Baptist Union wanted to know. If the general charges were true then the liberal ministers should be brought to account for what they were preaching. If the general charges could not be proven then Spurgeon was guilty of sowing discord among the brethren and insulting the dignity of the Baptist Union.

Charles Spurgeon now faced a terrible dilemma. If he began to name those he believed were on a "Down Grade" he would be open to legal charges of libel in a court of law. If he did not name names then he would be considered guilty by the Baptist Union of casting needless aspersions upon the name of good men ministering within the churches. Faced with these options, Spurgeon resigned from the Baptist Union. He did not want to name names and he did not want to keep stirring up troubled waters that diverted attention from the doctrines of grace to specific personalities.

Unfortunately, the dispute did not disappear after Spurgeon resigned, but intensified. Because of Spurgeon's national fame, his withdrawal from the Baptist Union still reflected in a negative way upon all that remained. In December of 1887, the Council of the Baptist Union met to consider what was to be done. Spurgeon was invited to meet with the Council. Thinking that he had been invited to discuss how the Union might rectify some of the areas of doctrinal concern, Spurgeon was astonished when his charges and resignation were brought up at the meeting on January 13, 1888.

Without wavering, the Council passed a resolution known as the "*vote of censure*," which stated that since Spurgeon had not documented his claims, the initial charges should not have been made. Spurgeon was devastated. He felt betrayed. During the last few years of his life a foreboding cloud followed Spurgeon's ministry for the controversy did not abate nor was it resolved. Rather than formulate a conservative doctrinal standard for all ministers within the Union, concessions were made to the liberal element. As a result, what the Soldier of the Saviour had warned against came to pass. The proclamation of the gospel was downgraded-and the "Son" of Righteousness began to set on the British Empire. Today, England may very well be the first European nation to become predominately a Muslim country religiously.