

## The Anguish and Agonies of Charles Spurgeon

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## The Down-Grade Controversy

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# What Did Spurgeon Believe?

Early Church ●

Middle Ages ●

Reformation ●

Early Modern ●

Modern ●

He insisted on thinking through his theology for himself—and often found himself out of step with his age.

MARK HOPKINS

**C**harles Spurgeon thought through his theology for himself. Taking over ideas he had not sifted and mastered was foreign to him. When Spurgeon reached unconventional conclusions, he did not shrink from implementing them, even when this was quite difficult.

Baptists had a long tradition of ordaining ministers, for example, but

Spurgeon managed to get his church to omit this step—he never was ordained. He campaigned arduously to do without the customary title, *Reverend*, and he eventually succeeded in replacing it with *Pastor*.

## Features of His Theology

Spurgeon considered his objections to ordination and the title *Reverend* as being scripturally based, a constant feature of his theology. As he put it, “I like to read my Bible so as never to have to blink when I approach a text. I like to have a theology which enables me to read [the Bible] right through from beginning to end, and to say, ‘I am as pleased with that text as I am with the other.’ ”

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Next, Spurgeon’s theology was all the more radically biblical for being unsystematic. In the late 1850s he tried to dovetail biblical teaching on human responsibility with his doctrine of election. By 1860 he became convinced it couldn’t be done; something had to yield. Since both doctrines were woven into the fabric of his Bible, however, Spurgeon decided to not sacrifice either. Instead, he sacrificed the possibility of a thoroughly systematic theology.

Spurgeon expressed his approach in a forthright introduction to a sermon on election (no. 303):

“It has been my earnest endeavor ever since I have preached the Word, never to keep back a single doctrine which I believe to be taught of God. It is time that we had done with the old and rusty systems that have so long curbed the freeness of religious speech. The Arminian trembles to go an inch beyond Arminius or Wesley, and many a Calvinist refers to John Gill or John Calvin as any ultimate authority. It is time that the systems were broken up, and that there was sufficient grace in all our hearts to believe everything taught in God’s Word, whether it was taught by

either of these men or not.... If God teaches it, it is enough. If it is not in the Word, away with it! Away with it! But if it be in the Word, agreeable or disagreeable, systematic or disorderly, I believe it.”

This was not a momentary conviction. Some years later Spurgeon said, “Angels may, perhaps, be systematic divines; for men it should be enough to follow the Word of God, let its teachings wind as they may.”

Finally, the basic, organizing principle of Spurgeon’s theology was not rational but *spiritual*. Some of his early published sermons, including Number 1 on the immutability of God, show a philosophical approach. But this disappeared by 1860 (along with his attempts to systematize his theology), leaving the field free for his profound spiritual experience to find deeper expression.

William Robertson Nicoll, an influential Nonconformist newspaper editor who knew Spurgeon’s sermons about as well as anyone, perceptively bracketed Spurgeon with John Bunyan as the two greatest evangelical mystics. Many of the finest passages in Spurgeon’s sermons draw on spiritual exploration into God’s mysteries that his theological mind was unable to map. Robertson Nicoll quoted a memorable example from an 1886 sermon on “The Three Hours’ Darkness”:

“This darkness tells us that the Passion is a great mystery into which we cannot pry. I try to explain it as a substitution, and I feel that where the language of Scripture is explicit, I may and must be explicit too. But yet I feel that the idea of substitution does not cover the whole of the matter, and that no human conception can completely grasp the whole of the dread mystery. It was wrought in darkness because the full, far-reaching meaning and result cannot be beheld of finite mind.

“Tell me the death of the Lord Jesus was a grand example of self-sacrifice—I can see that and much more. Tell me it was a wondrous obedience to the will of God—I can

see that and much more. Tell me it was the bearing of what ought to have been borne by myriads of sinners of the human race as the chastisement of their Sin—I can see that, and found my best hope upon it. But do not tell me that this is all that is in the Cross. No, great as this would be, there is much more in the Redeemer’s death. God veiled the Cross in darkness, and in darkness much of its deep meaning lies, not because God would not reveal it, but because we have not capacity to discern it all.”

These adjectives, then—*biblical*, *unsystematic*, and *spiritual*—characterize Spurgeon’s theology.

## Coming to Calvinism

What was the content of that theology? It is well known that Spurgeon was a Calvinist. He stood out from the contemporary trend toward abandoning and often denouncing Calvinism. In fact, Spurgeon gave his Calvinism a high profile. When his great, new Metropolitan Tabernacle opened in 1861, a series of sermons was preached on the “five points of Calvinism”—human depravity, election, particular redemption, effectual calling, and final perseverance.

What is not widely known, however, is that Spurgeon’s Calvinism was adopted rather than inherited. He came by it some months after his conversion. As Spurgeon told the story a few years later:

“Born, as all of us are by nature, an Arminian, I still believed the old things I had heard continually from the pulpit and did not see the grace of God. I remember sitting one day in the house of God and hearing a sermon as dry as possible, and as worthless as all such sermons are, when a thought struck my mind—*How came I to be converted? I prayed*, thought I. Then I thought, *How came I to pray? I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. How came I to read the Scriptures? Why—I did read them: and what led me to that?* And then, in a moment, I saw

that God was at the bottom of all, and that he was the author of faith. And then the whole doctrine opened up to me, from which I have not departed.”

## Development in His Thinking

It is difficult, however, to trace much development in Spurgeon’s theology. Spurgeon shared the common conservative view that “there is nothing new in theology save that which is false.” When revising his early published sermons, he boasted that though he might alter some expressions, there was no need to change any doctrine. The most change one can observe in his weekly published sermons is that he overcame, by 1860, his early hesitancy about inviting everyone, without distinction, to respond to the gospel.

The reason for Spurgeon’s stability was that he found in the Puritans’ theology ample material to help him fashion his own—although his own Bible study was always his main resource. A fast reader with extraordinary powers of retention, Spurgeon devoured vast quantities of verbose Puritan theology while still a teenager. Partly because of this influence, his theological emphases were different from those of most evangelicals of the period. In the Puritans’ writings, Spurgeon found three things he thought were in short supply in contemporary evangelicalism: rigorous theology, warm spirituality, and down-to-earth practicality.

“The kind of sermons that people need to hear are outgrowths of Scripture,” he told students at his Pastors’ College. “If they do not love to hear them, there is all the more reason why they should be preached to them.”

## Topics He Tended to Avoid

Spurgeon’s opinion on the practical relevance of a subject largely determined the

amount of attention he devoted to it. Most doctrines passed his “practicality test,” and the doctrines of atonement and Scripture gained especially high marks. But the areas he tended to avoid reveal as much as anything about his theology.

Eschatology, for example, fared badly. His lack of interest is all the more striking since many evangelicals at the time were preoccupied with the doctrine. During the vast majority of Spurgeon’s ministry the return of Christ seemed to him a distant prospect. His initial postmillennial views gave way to premillennialism early on, but he was wary of prophetic passages that acted as a magnet to others. He never felt able to endorse any of the specific premillennial positions then current.

Nor did Spurgeon participate in the holiness movements popular among late nineteenth-century evangelicals. He had a strong doctrine of sanctification, but he was quite scathing about perfectionism: “Though they persuade themselves that their sins are dead, it is ... highly probable that the rest of their sins are only keeping out of the way to let their pride have room to develop to ruinous proportions.”

A third area Spurgeon avoided was biblical criticism. He held a straightforward doctrine of biblical infallibility; he had no time for the higher criticism spreading from Germany. Instead of attempting to fight the critics on their ground, however, he steered clear of that entire branch of theological literature. In that, he was probably wise, for he was not really equipped for that battlefield. Spurgeon was not

a complete theologian; though his mind had many strengths, it was relatively weak in logic and analysis.

## Out of Sympathy with His Age

As a theologian, then, Spurgeon was in many ways out of sympathy with his age. He protested its widespread adoption of liberalism. And his Puritan-inspired Calvinism

stood at variance with contemporary evangelicalism.

But in several important respects, Spurgeon was representative of his generation, the English Nonconformists most completely influenced by the Romantic movement. The hallmarks are plainly discernible in him: a desire for reality, life, and spirituality; an impatience with the merely rational; guidance by moral imperatives issued from an authoritative conscience.

Before his conversion, for example, Spurgeon struggled to understand how God could justly remove people's sin. He had the same difficulty understanding the righteousness of atonement as did the contemporary pioneers of liberalism. Later on, however, Spurgeon defended objective atonement in language as imperiously ethical as any used by its attackers: "I cannot help holding that there must be an atonement before there can be pardon, because my conscience demands it, and my peace depends on it. The little court within my own heart is not satisfied unless some retribution be exacted for dishonour done to God."

Ultimately, however, in the Down-Grade Controversy [*see The Down-Grade Controversy*], Spurgeon issued a massive protest against liberalism. The crucial point at which Spurgeon's path diverged from the liberals' was not philosophical, methodological, critical, or ethical. It was spiritual.

Nourished by his profound submission to Scripture, Spurgeon deeply appreciated God's transcendent holiness, the vast gulf separating it from man's sinfulness, and the atonement that spanned that gulf. He had a truly three-dimensional theology.

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## The Eldership Center

### Ordination and Religious Titles

#### Sword and Trowel Volume 4, 1874 pages 111-117

Whence comes the whole paraphernalia of ordination as observed among some Dissenters? Since there is no special gift to bestow, why in any case the laying on of empty hands? Since we cannot pretend that mystic succession so vaunted by Ritualists, why are men styled "regularly ordained ministers"? A man who has preached for years is Mr. Brown, but after his ordination or recognition he develops into the Reverend Mr. Brown; what important change has he undergone? This comes before us in the form of addresses upon letters "Reverend Titus Smith, Mr. Spurgeon's College," or sometimes, "Reverend Timothy Jones, Spurgeon's Tabernacle." Rather odd, this! Here are reverend students of an unreverend preacher, the title being given to the one out of courtesy, and withheld from the other for the same reason. The Reverend Titus has met with a church which will insist upon an ordination, and he is ordained; but the President of his College, having never undergone such a process, nor even that imitation of it called a recognition, remains an unordained, unrecognized person to this day, and has not yet discovered the peculiar loss which he has sustained. We do not object to a recognition of the choice of the church by its neighbors and their ministers, on the contrary, we believe it to be a fraternal act, sanctioned by the very spirit of Christianity; but where it is supposed to be essential, is regarded as a ceremony, and is thought to be the crowning feature of the settlement, we demur.

"The Reverend Theophilus Robinson offered up the ordination prayer" has a Babylonish sound in our ears, and it is not much improved when it takes the form of "the recognition prayer." Is there, then, a ritual? Are we as much bound by an unwritten extempore liturgy as others by the Common Prayer? Must there always be "usual questions"? And why "usual"? Is there some legendary rule for the address to the church and the address to the pastor? Mark well, that we do not object to any one of these things, but we do question the propriety of stereotyping them, and speaking of the whole affair as if it were a matter to be gone about according to a certain pattern seen in the holy mount, or an order given forth in trust to the saints. We see germs of evil in the usual parlance, and therefore meet it with a Quo Warranto? Is not the divine call the real ordination to preach, and the call of the church the only ordination to the pastorate? The church is competent under the guidance or the Holy Spirit her own work, and if she calls in her sister churches, let her tell them what she has done, in such terms that they will never infer that they are called upon to complete the work. The ordination prayer should be prayed in the church meeting, and there and then the work should be done; for other churches to recognize the act is well and fitting, but not if it be viewed as needful to the completion of the act itself. We have noticed many signs of an error in this direction.

The small matter which we have mentioned leads on to another which is by no means small, namely, the notion in some churches that only an ordained or recognized minister should preside at the Lord's table. Small is our patience with this unmitigated Popery, and yet it is by no means uncommon. Pulpits which are most efficiently supplied on other Sundays by men who are without pastoral charge must be vacated by them on the first Sunday of the month because the friends like a stated minister to administer the sacrament. This may not always be the language employed, but it often is and it is an unsanctified jargon, revealing the influence of priestcraft. Whence comes it? By what scripture can it be justified? "Breaking bread from house to house" does not read very like it. We suppose that the idea of a deacon leading the communion would horrify a great many, but why? If the church should request a venerable brother to conduct the service, a brother of eminent grace and prayerfulness, would the ordinance be any the less instructive or consoling because he was not in the ministry? Naturally enough the pastor, when there is one, leads the way by the respectful consent of all; but would fellowship with Jesus be more difficult, if he were out of the way, and an elder or deacon occupied his place? Our experience has never led us to bemoan, on the account of our people, that the communion was a maimed rite when a beloved deacon or elder has filled our chair. We love to have our brethren sitting with us at the table, breaking the bread as much as we do, and giving thanks

aloud as we do, because we hope that by this visible sign men will see that "one is our Master, even Christ, and all we are brethren." Are we the less respected by our church officers for this? Do they take upon themselves lordly airs? Far from it. A more beloved and loving set of men never surrounded a pastor. We magnify our office in the best manner when we do not magnify it beyond the teaching of the Lord.

Who are we that our presence should render more valid, or more lawful, the remembrance of our Lord's death until he come? All things are to be done decently and in order, but that order does not necessitate a church's going without the Lord's Supper because there is no pastor or regular minister to be had. At least we fail to see any support for such an idea, except in the traditions of the fathers, and the sooner these are consigned to oblivion the better. We confess we do not admire the Plymouth fashion of passing round a lump of bread for all to peck at, like so many crows, or the plan of hawking a slice from hand to hand, for each one to break on his own account, for it is not a clean or decorous practice; and as it never would be tolerated at our own tables, it certainly ill becomes the table of the Lord: but even these odd ways are better, or at least less harmful, than the practice of a slated minister administering the elements, for "stated minister" is little more than "priest writ large" in the idea of weaker brethren; or if it be not so now, it soon may be so, and the sooner it is put an end to the better for posterity.

Even now we know of churches which have dispensed with the Lord's Supper week after week because the pastor was ill, there being, of course, no other brother in the whole community who had grace enough to preside at the table, or administer the sacrament, as some of the brotherhood call it. When matters have gone so far, it is surely time to speak out against such worship of men.

By one of those whimsical freaks of superstition for which there is no accounting, the benediction is in some regions almost as sacredly reserved for the minister as the absolution for the priest in Popish churches. We heard it remarked the other day as quite a singular thing that a non-ministerial brother, being in the chair at a religious meeting, had actually pronounced the benediction. We had not noticed the man's audacity, but evidently others had. Here was a mere layman thinking himself as able to invoke a blessing upon the assembly as the clerics around him! The brethren around us expressed their pleasure that he had done so, but even this showed that it was rather an innovation, very commendable, no doubt, in these days, but still an innovation. "Will you close the meeting?" has often been whispered in a minister's ear when some excellent Christian man has been in prayer, who might just as well as not have finished his supplication with the blessing, and so have dismissed the assembly. But that must not be, only ministers must take those sacred words upon their polluted lips! Fiddle-de-dee is the only word which will enable us to vent our feelings.

But we forbear, and change the subject. It is very natural that our friends should desire their minister to baptize them, and yet there is no reason why he should do so on account of his office. It does not appear from the Scriptures to have been an act peculiar to preachers; in fact, at least one of them, and he by no means the least, was not sent to baptize, but to preach the gospel. A vigorous Christian member of the church is far more in his place in the baptismal waters than his ailing, consumptive, or rheumatic pastor. Any objection urged against this assertion is another unconscious leaning to tradition, if not a relic of superstition. The usefulness of the ordinance does not depend upon the baptizer, but upon the the gracious meditation and earnest prayer of the person baptized: the good which he will receive will depend upon how far his whole soul is receptive of the divine influence, and in no sense, manner, or degree upon the agent of the baptism. We do not know what Paedobaptists think upon their ceremony, but we fear that the most of them must have the minister to do it, and would hardly like their infants to be left to the operation of an unordained man. If it be so, we do not so very much wonder at their belief, for as it is clear that no good arises to an infant from its own prayers or meditations during the ceremony, there is a natural tendency to look for some official importance in the performer of the rite; but yet we do not and cannot believe that our Paedobaptist friends have fallen so low as that; we make no charge, and hope we shall never have cause to do so. For Baptists to attach the smallest importance to the ordinance of baptism being administered either by a minister or a private member Would be to the last degree inconsistent, and yet we are not sure that the inconsistency is not to be found in many quarters. It behooves ministers to break down. in time every tendency to make us into necessary adjuncts of the ordinances, for this is one step towards making us priests.

Upon the same spirit as it crops up in reference to marriages and burials we need not remark. Neither of these things are in themselves our work, although, as they furnish us with excellent occasions for

doing good, it is well for us to attend to them. At the same time here are two threads for the syrup of superstition to crystallize upon, and it will do so if not prevented.

The ignorant evidently attach some importance to reading or speaking over a corpse at a funeral, and do not regard the service as meant wholly for themselves, but as having some sort of relation to the departed. To have a gracious exhortation and prayer at home, and then lay the dear remains in the tomb in solemn silence, would be regarded as barbarity by many, and yet it would be no unseemly thing. To give the minister liberty to keep to the word of God and prayer, and release him from serving sepulchers, is according to apostolic precedent, and yet our churches would be grieved if it were carried out. When one of the Lord's disciples desired to postpone his evangelistic labors till he had buried his father, he was bidden to let the dead bury their dead; but such advice followed out now-a-days would bring down heavy censure upon the minister. Is this as it should be? Our calling is to preach the gospel, and not to marry the living or bury the dead.

By what process have these things come to be an integral part of our ministry? Are they really the business of the ministers of Christ? It is not meet that we should needlessly grieve any by refusing to attend upon either of these occasions, but we must take heed that we do not feed the sickly sentimentalism which makes the preacher necessary to them. We must all have seen how soon a superstition springs up, and therefore we must be on our guard not to water the ill weed.

The duty of visiting the sick and dying is one which we do not wish to shirk, but may it not become another door for priestliness to enter? and, indeed, is it not so? The poor will hasten to our doors, and ask us to "come and Tray to their sick friends:" yes, those are the very words "Please, sir, would you come and pray to my husband?" Often have we heard the expression, "The clergyman has been in and prayed a prayer to him, sir." To the London poor ministers both in church and dissent are alike parsons or clergymen, and city missionaries are almost as good, and in their distress they very frequently send for one or another of us out of sheer superstition; not because they would learn the way of salvation, but because "having a good man in to pray to them" is the right thing to do for dying people. The like, or perhaps a worse superstition, leads to a high estimate of a burial service. Rattled over as it frequently is by cemetery chaplains, who have "one on and two more awaiting," the burial service cannot be of any use to the living, and must surely be performed for the sake of the dead.

Nobody says so among Protestants, but the idea is in the air and may by degrees condense into a belief, unless we are expressly earnest to prevent it. We shall continue to mingle with the devout men who carry our Stephens to the sepulcher, and we shall not fail to weep with them that weep, but we will not allow the ignorant to imagine that we are there to perform some mystic rite.

These few remarks touch only upon ministers, and leave other matters for another equally brief chapter; but we cannot lay down the pen without asking why so many brethren still retain the title of Reverend? We are willing to reverence the aged pastor, and we did not hesitate to give that title to our beloved friend George Rogers, just in the same way as we use the term "the venerable Bede," or "the judicious Hooker," but we are not prepared to reverence every stripling who ascends the pulpit; and, moreover, if we thought it due to others to call them reverend, we should still want some reason for their calling themselves so. It seems rather odd to us that a man should print upon his visiting card the fact that he is a reverend person. Why does he not occasionally vary the term, and call himself estimable, amiable, talented, or beloved? Would this seem odd? Is there any valid objection to such a use of adjectives after the fashion is once set by employing the word reverend? If a man were to assume the title of reverend for the first time in history it would look ridiculous, if not presumptuous or profane. Why does not the Sunday-school teacher call himself "the Respectable John Jones," or the City Missionary dub himself "the Hardworking William Evans"? Why do we not, like members of secret orders and others, go in for Worthy Masterships and Past Grands, and the like?

I hope that we can reply that we do not care for such honors, and are content to leave them to men of the world, or to the use of those who think they can do some good thereby. It may be said that the title of reverend is only one of courtesy, but then so was the title of Rabbi among the Jews, yet the disciples were not to be called Rabbi. It is, at any rate, a suspicious circumstance that among mankind no class of persons should so commonly describe themselves by a pretentious title as the professed ministers of the lowly Jesus. Peter and Paul were right reverend men, but they would have been the last to have called themselves so. No sensible person does reverence us one jot the more because we

assume the title. It certainly is in some cases a flagrant misnomer, and its main use seems to be the pestilent one of keeping up the unscriptural distinction of clergy and laity.

A lad fresh from college, who has just been placed in a pulpit, is the Reverend Smith, while his eminently godly grandfather, who has for fifty years walked with God, and is now ripe for heaven, has no such claim to reverence. A gentleman of ability, education, and eminent piety preaches in various places with much zeal and abundant success, but he is no reverend; while a man of meager gifts, whose principal success seems to lie in scattering the flock, wears the priestly prefix, having a name to be revered when he commands no esteem whatever. This may be a trifle, many no doubt so regard it; why, then, are they not prepared to abstain from it? The less the value of the epithet the less reason for continuing the use of it. It would be hard to say who has a right to it, for many use it who have not been pastors for years, and have not preached a sermon for many a day; what on earth are they to be revered for? Other men are always preaching, and yet no one calls them reverend, but why not? The distribution of this wonderful honor is not fairly arranged. We suggest that, as the wife is to see that she reverence her husband, every married man has a degree of claim to the title of Rev., and the sooner all benedicts exercise the privilege, the sooner will the present clerical use of it pass out of fashion. We wonder when men first sought out this invention, and from whose original mind did the original sin emanate. We suspect that he lived in the Roman Row of Vanity Fair, although the Reverend John Bunyan does not mention him. One thing is pretty certain, he did not flourish in the days of the Reverend Paul, or the Reverend Apollos, or the Reverend Cephas.

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