

“Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” - Romans 1:1

“Set Apart”

(An apostolic example. A biblical command. An absolute necessity.)

“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial (false gods), or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,’ says the Lord. And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you. ‘And I will be a Father to you, and you shall be sons & daughters to Me,’ says the Lord Almighty.”

- 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

“I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with the idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But, actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler – not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.”

- 1 Corinthians 5:9-13

The Down Grade Controversy

In March 1887, Charles Spurgeon published the first of two articles entitled "The Down Grade" in his monthly magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*. The articles were published anonymously, but the author was Robert Shindler, Spurgeon's close friend and fellow Baptist pastor. Shindler wrote the articles with input from Spurgeon, who footnoted the first article with a personal endorsement:

*Earnest attention is requested for this paper... **We are going down hill at breakneck speed.***

Tracing the state of evangelicalism from the Puritan age to his own era, Shindler noted that every revival of true evangelical faith had been followed within a generation or two by a drift away from sound doctrine, ultimately leading to wholesale apostasy. He likened this drifting from truth to a downhill slope, and thus labeled it "the down-grade."

[At the end of the Puritan age] by some means or other, first the ministers, then the Churches, got on "the down grade," and in some cases, the descent was rapid, and in all, very disastrous. In proportion as the ministers seceded from the old Puritan godliness of life, and the old Calvinistic form of doctrine, they commonly became less earnest and less simple in their preaching, more speculative and less spiritual in the matter of their discourses, and dwelt more on the moral teachings of the New Testament, than on the great central truths of revelation. Natural theology frequently took the place, which the great truths of the gospel ought to have held, and the sermons became more and more Christ-less. Corresponding results in the character and life, first of the preachers and then of the people, were only too plainly apparent.

Shindler recounted how hundreds of post-Puritan churches had abandoned sound doctrine in favor of rationalistic skepticism, Unitarianism, and other liberal beliefs. The downward slide usually began slowly, almost imperceptibly. He suggested that denominations often "got on the down-grade" when they abandoned Calvinism (which emphasizes God's sovereignty in salvation) in favor of Arminianism (which makes human will the decisive factor). Other groups embraced *Arianism* (which denies the full deity of Christ). Still others simply became enamored with scholarship and worldly wisdom; consequently they lost their zeal for truth.

Shindler further stated... *"some who got on 'the down grade' went further than they intended, showing that it is easier to get on than to get off & that where there is no brake it is very difficult to stop."*

Some who abandoned the faith did so openly, Shindler said. But **many purposely concealed their skepticism and heresy, preferring to sow seeds of doubt while posing as orthodox believers.**

"These men deepened their own condemnation, and promoted the everlasting ruin of many of their followers by their hypocrisy and deceit; professing to be the ambassadors of Christ, and the heralds of his glorious gospel, their aim was (in reality,) to ignore his claims... and trample his crown in the dust."

Many of those who remained true to the faith were nevertheless reluctant to fight for what they believed in. Evangelical preaching was often cold and lifeless, and even those who held to sound doctrine were careless about where they drew the line in their associations with others...

Thus, within only a few decades, the Puritan fervor that had so captured the soul of England gave way to dry, listless apostate teaching. Churches became lax in granting membership privileges to the unregenerate. People who were, in Shindler's words, **"strangers to the work of renewing grace" nevertheless claimed to be Christians** and were admitted to membership—even leadership—in the churches. ***These people "chose them pastors after their own hearts, men who could, and would, and did, cry 'Peace, peace,' when the only (true) way of peace was ignored or denied."***

Shindler concluded that first paper on "The Down Grade" with these words:

"These facts furnish a lesson for the present times, when, as in some cases, it is all too plainly apparent men are willing to forego the old for the sake of the new. But commonly it is found in theology that that which is true is not new, and that which is new is not true."

"Down Grade" II

In April, *The Sword and the Trowel* carried a second article entitled "The Down Grade." In it, Robert Shindler continued his overview of the history of the decline of Puritanism. **He laid the blame for the downhill slide at the feet of the church leaders. Even those who were orthodox in their teaching were not earnestly contending (Jude 3), but were weak in defending the faith,** Shindler said.

Shindler paraphrased Hosea 4:9: *"Like priest, like people," and wrote, "Little good can be expected of such ministers, and little hoped for of the hearers who approve their sentiments."* He gave specific examples of how tolerance had led to disaster, noting that the "tadpole of Darwinism was hatched [in a pew] of the old chapel..." Darwin had first been introduced to skepticism by a pastor!

How did so many Bible-believing churches go astray? And why does this happen again and again in human history? In the case of every errant course **there is always a first wrong step.** If we can trace that wrong step, we may be able to avoid it and its results... What is the first step astray?... What was the common denominator between all those who started on the down-grade?

The first step astray is a (lack) of adequate faith in the divine inspiration of the sacred Scriptures.

All the while a man bows to the authority of God's Word, he will not entertain any sentiment contrary to its teaching... He esteems that holy Book, concerning all things, to be right, and therefore he hates every false way. But let a man question, or entertain low views of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and he is without chart to guide him, and without anchor to hold him.

"...this fact is apparent: that where ministers and Christian churches have held fast to the truth that the Holy Scriptures have been given by God as an authoritative and infallible rule of faith and practice, they have never wandered very seriously out of the right way. But when, on the other hand, reason has been exalted above revelation... all kinds of errors and mischiefs have been the result."

Shindler quoted the Rev. Job Orton..., **a warning to pastors flirting with liberal theology:**

"I have long since found," says [Orton] "(and every year that I live increases my conviction of it), that when ministers entertain their people with lively and pretty things... while they neglect the peculiar of the gospel, never or seldom display the grace of God, and the love of Christ in our redemption; the necessity of regeneration and sanctification by a constant dependence on the Holy Spirit of God for assistance and strength in the duties of the Christian life, their congregations are in a wretched state... There is a fatal deadness spread over the congregation. They run in 'the course of this world,' follow every fashionable folly, and family and personal godliness seems in general to be lost among them."

Three months later, Charles Haddon Spurgeon himself would write about "the down-grade."

The controversy was only beginning to heat up.
Down Grade III

In August *The Sword and the Trowel* carried an article by Spurgeon entitled "Another Word Concerning the Down-Grade." The tone of this article was more urgent than Shindler's had been. From the opening paragraph, **Spurgeon's tone was more militant, more intense** than Shindler had been in the

earlier articles...

"Our solemn conviction is that things are much worse in many churches than they seem to be, and are rapidly tending downward... A new religion has been initiated, which is no more Christianity than chalk is cheese..."

"Alas! many are returning to the poisoned cups... Too many ministers are toying with the deadly cobra of 'another gospel,' in the form of 'modern thought.'"

Who was **chiefly to blame** for the decline? Spurgeon believed it was **the preachers**:

"The case is mournful. Certain ministers are making infidels. Avowed atheists are not a tenth as dangerous as those preachers who scatter doubt and stab at faith... Germany was made unbelieving by her preachers, and England is following in her tracks."

Spurgeon made no effort to disguise his contempt...

"These destroyers of our churches appear to be as content with their work as monkeys with their mischief."

To those who might be put off by such frankness, Spurgeon wrote:

"A little plain-speaking would do a world of good just now. These gentlemen desire to be let alone. They want no noise raised. Of course thieves hate watch-dogs, and love darkness. It is time that somebody should spring his rattle, & call attention to the way in which God is being robbed of his glory, and man of his hope."

At the end of the article, Spurgeon fired this shot, which for the first time raised the issue that would become the focus of all the subsequent controversy:

"It now becomes a serious question how far those who abide by the faith once delivered to the saints should fraternize with those who have turned aside to another gospel. Christian love has its claims, and divisions are to be shunned as grievous evils; but how far are we justified in being in confederacy with those who are departing from the truth? It is a difficult question to answer so as to keep the balance of the duties. For the present it behooves believers to be cautious, lest they lend their support and countenance to the betrayers of the Lord... Numbers of easy-minded people wink at error so long as it is committed by a clever man and a good-natured brother, who has so many fine points about him. Let each believer judge for himself; but, for our part, we have put on a few fresh bolts to our door, and we have given orders to keep the chain up; for, under colour of begging the friendship of the servant, there are those about, who aim at robbing the Master."

Spurgeon was now suggesting that true believers might have reason to sever their organizational ties with those who were promulgating the new theology.

In Spurgeon's estimation the truth of the Word had been so seriously compromised that true Christians needed to consider the command of **2 Corinthians 6:17**:

"Come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. "And do not touch what is unclean."

"If for a while the 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." – C.H. Spurgeon

The article rocked the evangelical world. **Spurgeon, who for decades had been almost universally revered by evangelicals, was suddenly besieged with critics from within the camp.** What he was proposing was diametrically opposed to the consensus of evangelical thought. All the trends were toward unification, harmony, amalgamation, and brotherhood. **Suddenly here was a lone voice**—but the most influential voice of all—**urging true believers to become separatists (“set apart”)**. The church was neither prepared nor willing to receive such counsel—not even from the Prince of Preachers.

Down Grade IV

Despite pleas from some of the brethren that he soften his rhetoric or tone down his complaints, Spurgeon ratcheted up the intensity in a September *Sword and Trowel* article... In fact, he was now wondering if his alarm had been too little, too late:

*"According to the best of our ability we sounded an alarm in Zion concerning the growing evils of the times, and we have received abundant proof that it was none too soon... **the case of the church at this present is even worse than we thought it to be.** It seems that, instead of being guilty of exaggeration, we should have been justified in the production of a far more terrible picture. This fact causes us real sorrow... It is no joy to us to bring accusations; it is no pleasure to our heart to seem to be in antagonism with so many."*

Spurgeon's opponents attacked him personally... What is more, Spurgeon's adversaries utterly ignored the substance of his arguments. "No one has set himself to disprove our allegations," Spurgeon wrote. No one had denied any of his charges. Indeed, no one could. Though few wanted to admit it, English evangelicalism was indeed on the down-grade. Employing the vivid imagery that was the hallmark of Spurgeon's preaching, he wrote:

"The house is being robbed, its very walls are being digged down, but the good people who are in bed are too fond of the warmth, and too much afraid of getting broken heads, to go downstairs and meet the burglars; they are even half vexed that a certain noisy fellow will spring his rattle, or cry, 'Thieves!'"

"A chasm is opening between the men who believe their Bibles and the men who are prepared for an advance upon Scripture. Inspiration and speculation cannot long abide in peace. Compromise, there can be none. We cannot hold the inspiration of the Word, and yet reject it; we cannot believe in the atonement and deny it; we cannot hold the doctrine of the fall and yet talk of the evolution of spiritual life from human nature; we cannot recognize the punishment of the impenitent and yet indulge the "larger hope." One way or the other we must go. Decision is the virtue of the hour. Neither when we have chosen our way can we keep company with those who go the other way."

Denominational leaders began looking for a way of compromise. But **Spurgeon refused to compromise:**

"Let those who will keep the narrow way keep it, and suffer for their choice; but to hope to follow the broad road at the same time is an absurdity. What communion hath Christ with

Belial (false gods)? With steadfast faith let us take our places; not in anger, not in the spirit of suspicion or division, but in watchfulness and resolve. Let us not pretend to a fellowship which we do not feel, nor hide convictions which are burning in our hearts. The times are perilous, and the responsibility of every individual believer is a burden which he must bear, or prove a traitor. What each man's place and course should be the Lord will make clear unto him."

And thus Spurgeon ended his article. He had thrown down the gauntlet. His mind and heart were set. He would not be moved.

Down Grade V

The October issue of *The Sword and the Trowel* carried the third of Spurgeon's articles about the down-grade. This article, entitled "The Case Proved," consisted mostly of excerpts from letters and reviews Spurgeon had received in response to the earlier articles. These fell into two categories. The first were from readers who saw controversy brewing and wanted to still the storm. Spurgeon characterized them as "***esteemed friends***" who ***wanted to "rush in between the combatants, and declare that there was no cause for war,*** but that our motto might continue to be 'Peace, peace!'" Spurgeon accused such people of being "so supremely amiable that they see all things through spectacles of tinted glass." The second category were responses from people affirming Spurgeon's assessment of the dismal state of affairs. Many described specific examples of compromise and false teaching among those who classified themselves as evangelical.

Again Spurgeon asked the question:

"Are brethren who remain orthodox prepared to endorse such sentiments by remaining in union with those who hold and teach them? To us it appears that there are many things upon which compromise is possible, but there are others in which it would be an act of treason to pretend to fellowship. With deep regret we abstain from assembling with those whom we dearly love and heartily respect, since it would involve us in a confederacy with those with whom we can have no communion in the Lord."

Withdrawal from the Union

On October 28, 1887, Spurgeon wrote...

"Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin. To be very plain, we are unable to call these things Christian Unions, they begin to look like Confederacies in Evil."

Spurgeon saw no reason true Christians should accommodate those who doubted the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.

"If these men believe such things, let them teach them, and construct churches, unions, and brotherhoods for themselves! Why must they come among us?"

The Final Compromise

"No creed but Christ" was a popular sentiment among evangelicals in Spurgeon's day. There were many who felt creeds and doctrinal statements were somehow sub-Christian. And there is a legitimate

sense in which we ought to guard against elevating any creed above Scripture. When that happens, the creed itself can become an idol, something that actually hinders true worship. But Spurgeon pointed out that if the creed itself is *true*—that is, if it is in harmony with Scripture and subject to Scripture—no such danger exists:

"To say that 'a creed comes between a man and his God,' is to suppose that it is not true; for truth, however definitely stated, does not divide the believer from his Lord. So far as I am concerned, that which I believe I am not ashamed to state in the plainest possible language; and the truth I hold I embrace because I believe it to be the mind of God revealed in his infallible Word."

"I am unable to sympathize with a man who says he has no creed; because I believe him to be in the wrong by his own showing. He ought to have a creed. What is equally certain, he has a creed—he must have one, even though he repudiates the notion. His very unbelief is, in a sense, a creed. The objection to a creed is a very pleasant way of concealing objection to discipline.... What is wished for is a Union which will, like Noah's Ark, afford shelter both for the clean and for the unclean, for creeping things and winged fowls."

The Aftermath

Spurgeon wrote:

*"May God help those who do not believe these things! Where must they be?" It was as though it had been said, "Yes, we believe in the Godhead of the Lord Jesus; **but** we would not keep a man out of our fellowship because he thought our Lord to be a mere man. We believe in the atonement; **but** if another man rejects it, he must not, therefore, be excluded from our number."*

Spurgeon hated schism. **He did not want to be divisive. But his conscience would not permit him to align with the enemies of the gospel.** In the end he concluded that separating from the Union was actually the best way to promote true unity:

"Nothing has ever more largely promoted the union of the true than the break with the false."

Spurgeon saw separation as a biblical *necessity*...

"Whether others do so or not, I have felt the power of the text, 'Come out from among them, and be ye separate,' and have quitted both Union and Association once for all... This is forced upon me, not only by my convictions, but also by the experience of the utter uselessness of attempting to deal with the evil except by personally coming out from it."

Spurgeon did not actively seek to pull others out of the Union, but he could not understand why men who wanted to remain faithful to the Scriptures would continue to belong to an organization that was so obviously barreling down the down-grade:

Numbers of good brethren in different ways remain in fellowship with those who are undermining the gospel; and they talk of their conduct as though it were a loving course which the Lord will approve of in the day of his appearing. We cannot understand them. The bounden

duty of a true believer towards men who profess to be Christians, and yet deny the Word of the Lord, and reject the fundamentals of the gospel, is to come out from among them... The operation of an evangelical party within can only repress, and, perhaps, conceal, the evil for a time; but meanwhile, sin is committed by the compromise itself, and no permanently good result can follow...

Our present sorrowful protest is not a matter of this man or that, this error or that; but of principle.

It was surely difficult for Spurgeon himself, and even his early biographers to assess the value of the Down-Grade Controversy... Spurgeon's actions helped alert evangelicals worldwide to the dangers of modernism and the down-grade.

May the Lord graciously purge His Church of all false doctrine, all false teachers, and all who are traitors in the camp of Israel! And may the Spirit from on high be poured out upon all flesh, that all the ends of the earth may see, and own, and rejoice in, the salvation of our God!

The Down-Grade Controversy was a perpetual grief to Spurgeon until his death on January 31, 1892. **Close friends, and even some of the students from his Pastors' College, turned against him. But Spurgeon declared to the end that he did not regret the stand he had taken.**

“Complicity with error will take from the best of men the power to enter any successful protest against it.”

- C.H. Spurgeon