

AN APPEAL TO MR. SPURGEON¹

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YOU ask me what is the significance of Mr. Spurgeon's retirement from the Baptist Union. But has he actually retired? I am most unwilling to believe that the preacher of the Metropolitan Tabernacle will withdraw from men who respect and love him, and with whom he has been in fellowship for many years. True, a rumour reached our recent Sheffield meetings of that sort, but it was contradicted by those who professed to know Mr. Spurgeon's mind, and subsequently by the written declaration of his secretary. Moreover, notwithstanding what appears in the papers, Dr. Booth, secretary of the Baptist Union, who has been on terms of personal intimacy with Mr. Spurgeon for nearly a quarter of a century, has not received any notice of his retirement.

But the *Baptist* cites as from the forthcoming number of the *Sword and Trowel* the following ominous words as Mr. Spurgeon's: "We retire at once and distinctly from the Baptist Union." This announcement--for we must believe it to be authorized--will be received with keen regret, not only by the officers of the council of the Baptist Union, but throughout our churches and in the regions beyond. Mr. Spurgeon does not know how sincerely he is respected for the signal services he has rendered to the churches and the nation. It has not been his privilege, I think, to be at the meetings of the Union since 1882, when he preached at Liverpool; and he is unaware of the real regard our ministers and churches cherish for him, though they were never in perfect accord with the forms of his theology or with the whole of its pith and substance, and who, whatever he may do, will still persist in that regard for his high character, and gratitude for his long and illustrious toil. It is almost an impertinence to say that no one questions the integrity of Mr. Spurgeon's motive Or the sincerity of his aim. That goes without saying. Mr. Spurgeon "retires at once and distinctly from the Baptist Union" because, though he is its friend and the friend of Christian union, he loves Christ more. The act of separation is homage to Christ and to conscience. "To pursue union," says Mr. Spurgeon, "at the expense of truth is treason to the Lord Jesus." "Fellowship with known 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. Before the face of God we fear they wear no other aspect. To our inmost heart this is a sad truth from which we cannot break away." It is clear that, like Luther, Mr. Spurgeon feels that he can do no other. On this divisive act he takes his stand. Conscience bids him do it, and he obeys.

John Morley has a fine saying to the effect that "intrinsic conviction is the mainstay of human advancement." Baptists have always believed that. Since the day that there came out of what Professor Masson calls "a dingy meeting-house in Old London" the first promulgation of the regenerating doctrine of "liberty of conscience" they have fought, and suffered, and died for the spiritual rights and total independence of the individual man. All our traditional principles and spirit will constrain us, therefore, to honour Mr. Spurgeon for his unswerving fidelity to

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his conviction of duty, and to believe that though the act be for the moment divisive and unspeakably hurtful, yet if the truth gain, all will gain, the Baptist Union included; and, therefore, we may subdue our present sorrow by the expectation of a greater good not far off. But this last phase in the "down-grade" controversy requires to be faced as it affects the Baptist Union itself. For the saddest part of the story is that in his loyalty to conscience and Christ Mr. Spurgeon feels compelled to deny a "Christian name" to "the Baptist" and "other Unions," and to assert that "they begin to look like confederacies in evil"; and indeed "wear no other aspect before God." These are grave charges indeed. I cannot imagine an indictment surpassing it in gravity, in indiscriminate breadth, or in possibilities of mischief. It requires solemn and fearless treatment. It ought to be met in that spirit of unswerving loyalty to truth and conscience in which it is made. To take the Baptist Union only. It consists of between 1,800 and 2,000 churches with their pastors, and a communing membership of over 200,000. Are these churches and pastors federated together in the Union "in evil"? Mr. Spurgeon states his "case" with great energy. Does he prove it? Has he a "case" at all? I have no express authority to speak for the Baptist Union, but I have an acquaintance with the Union and the churches of which it is composed extending over thirty years; and though I disclaim a knowledge of facts adequate to the need, yet my position and opportunities have certainly been favourable for the acquisition of information on the various counts in this indictment. What are these counts? No books are cited. No sermons quoted. No papers read at the Union are put in evidence. No addresses given at its meetings are advanced. Not a solitary man, not a solitary church is named. No suspected individual is asked whether he have not been misjudged, or whether inferences he vehemently repudiates may have not been drawn from conclusions in which he steadfastly believes. We have, taking in hand the statement with which Mr. Spurgeon accompanies his retirement, the following six allegations--namely, that some persons are allowed to remain in the Union who, (1) "make light of the Atonement, (2) "deny the personality of the Holy Ghost," (3) call the Fall a fable, (4) speak of "justification by faith as immoral," (5) refuse credence to the dogma of the "plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures;" and (6) hold that there is another probation after death," with possibilities "of a future restitution of the lost."

The prodigious difficulty of diagnosing the religious belief of the members of an organization so vast as the Baptist Union is obvious. Besides, every observer is tempted to think the world only a whispering gallery cleverly constructed to echo his own opinions. I would not abate one jot the reality or gravity of the theological movements in the midst of which we are all living. Truth does not lose by excess of frankness; it must suffer if we are not scrupulously fair and severely exact in sifting all we know. The first four of the six charges are not only unproved, but so far as I know they cannot be proved. Instead of the Atonement being "made light of" men never were so persistent in the assertion of the fact of vicarious sacrifice, or awe-filled before its mystery, or glad in its wealth of meaning. Stripped of the metaphysical conceptions of scholastic philosophy men declare "Christ crucified, the wisdom of God, and the power of God, the love of God, and the righteousness of God," with an emphasis and energy far excelling what I

remember of the pulpits of twenty and thirty years ago. Along with this there is a larger faith in "the ministry of the Holy Ghost," and though there is a wide-spread recognition of the difficulty of defining God, and setting out in clear speech the inter-relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, yet there is a more vivid sense of the personal presence of the Holy Ghost, reminding one of the psalmists and prophets of the Hebrew Revelation. And when Mr. Spurgeon speaks of men calling "the Fall a fable," is he not resorting to that unworthy weapon of controversy in which a vehemently repudiated "inference" is treated as an accepted faith? The terrible moral catastrophe of sin every man among us recognizes, deplures, and seeks to repair through the grace of Christ. As to our men saying that "justification by faith is immoral," I have not heard a whisper of it. From the time of the Apostle Paul, protests have been made against so preaching the doctrine that it may weaken conscience, and it is to be hoped that in this respect we are in the apostolic succession. What, then, is left? Is it the "plenary"--that is, the verbal and mechanical inspiration of the Holy Scriptures? But that is a post-Reformation dogma, created to take the place of the dethroned Pope, and has done incredible hurt to souls. That was denied thirty years ago; and, indeed, it would be difficult to find half a dozen theologians of repute who hold it, but I question the possibility of finding one of our men who does not hold and teach the uniqueness, fulness, adequacy, and real inspiration of the Revelation of God in the Holy Scriptures. Those who know Mr. Spurgeon will expect the sixth and last point to be the one on which he feels most acutely. Probably it is so. The doctrine of the "last things" has gained an increasing prominence in the debates of these later years, and the controversy is still rife. Of my college tutors one held the doctrine of "everlasting punishment," but expressed it with qualifications and limitations that removed it far from the pagan notions of antiquity; a second held but did not teach "conditional immortality;" and a third kept, as he said, "to the exact words of Scripture," cherishing a secret hope that somehow, he knew not how, "good might be the final goal of ill." That was in 1855-8. To speak with authority as to the precise number of persons holding any particular belief is impossible; but this I gather, from free and extended conversation with ministers that the temper in which they think of "man after death" has wholly changed. Mr. Spurgeon himself is a witness to this. It is one of passionate pity and overflowing tenderness. There is the utmost reluctance to believe the worst of any man, combined with eagerness to discover and readiness to accept without reserve "the mind of Christ."

Everywhere you may hear an emphatic insistence of the universality of the law of retribution here and hereafter; a clear recognition of the "tendency of character to permanence," and a positive dread lest even by hinting at the "hope" of hearing glad tidings after death, man should be slow to listen to the voice that speaks to-day. Speaking broadly, and without reference to certain notable exceptions, Baptist pastors are marked by a theological caution and conservatism that, considering our age, is, to me at least, surprising. But supposing Mr. Spurgeon really had a "case" and his indictment could be proved, is his withdrawal the best service that can be rendered, not to the Baptist Union only, but to the Kingdom of Heaven, for which the Baptist Union exists? The times are great and grave; greater--and graver than even Mr. Spurgeon asserts. "The coming battle" will not be shut

up in one particular field, it will proceed at the same time over several fields. The Christian scholars have their contest. The Old Testament is being put into a fire heated to sevenfold fierceness. and the newer record is still unconsumed in a burning bush of criticism. The constructive theologians confront a task, vast, awful, but inspiring. Church builders see the old polities and orders changing and scarcely know what way to take with the social difficulties that rise at a hundred points at once. This, surely, of all times is not the hour for divisiveness. Every soldier is wanted. Not an ounce of power can be spared. Every voice calls for union, sweet reasonableness, large-minded judgments, fighting shoulder to shoulder in the stout combat for God and man.

The issue is on no account doubtful. Christianity has seen darker nights (if indeed it be dark) turn to clearest day; but when one thinks of what Mr. Spurgeon might do in and through the Baptist Union, were he to take his place among men whose burning passion is to be loyal to Christ--both his Lord and ours--whose hearts are constrained by the same love of Christ, whose fidelity is proved by much self-denial, one cannot but regard his withdrawal as one of the saddest signs of the religious life of the day. How it exposes to suspicion a large number of innocent men whom he might help! How it multiplies the burdens of men whom he might fire with new courage! How it repels those who if they have been overtaken in a fault might be restored in the spirit of meekness! Is not this the "Down Grade"? Alas! "down" from the spirit of the Saviour, who did not withdraw from Thomas, but drew him nearer to Himself, and by new evidence fortified his faith; "down" from that love of the brethren that hides a multitude of sins rather than expose them to the scoffing of the *Saturday Review* and the *Church Times*; "down" from that growing knowledge of God in Christ and increasing conformity to the spirit of Christ which I believe with all my heart is now in a large degree the possession of the Churches of the Baptist Union.

One word is full of hope. Mr. Spurgeon speaks of the Union "beginning to look like a confederacy of evil." Only "beginning." Will not Mr. Spurgeon aid in stopping its growth? The Baptist Union is all-powerful. It can make a "creed" if it can be convinced that it is the will of Christ. It can restrict its fellowship if it can be brought to see that thereby evil will be stopped and good done. It is free to engage in all work that will deliver men from falsehood and wrong. Let Mr. Spurgeon come and trust his brethren and give a fresh impetus to that true and solid progress of the Baptist churches which is the indisputable mark of the last thirty years.