

REVIEW ARTICLE

C. H. Spurgeon, Biblical Inerrancy, and Premillennialism

JOHN C. WHITCOMB

Lamplighter and Son, by Craig Skinner. Nashville: Broadman, 1984. Pp. 269. Cloth. \$11.95.

Many who consider Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) to have been one of the greatest pastor-teachers in all of church history would be surprised to learn that he was the father of twin sons who also became preachers of God's Word. If Charles Haddon could be called "the forgotten Spurgeon" (as one prominent biographer, Iain Murray, entitled his book), how much less remembered are his two sons!

One of his sons, Thomas (1856-1917), spent many years in Australia and New Zealand, built the largest regular Free Church congregation in the southern hemisphere in Auckland (p. 53), and finally succeeded his father as pastor of the great Metropolitan Tabernacle of South London (1894-1908). The predictably hopeless task of effectively filling the shoes of his father was complicated not only by physical weakness but also by the jealousy and strong opposition of his father's younger brother, James A. Spurgeon, who had served well in the Tabernacle for several years as a copastor (pp. 99-111; but cf. p. 92). Others were brought into the conflict, including the noted American Bible teacher, A. T. Pierson (pp. 100-105).

In 1898, during a Pastors' College conference, the huge Tabernacle burned to the ground (pp. 160-64). The rebuilding project was one of Thomas Spurgeon's greatest achievements (p. 220). Nevertheless, crowds were much smaller in the new building (p. 164), and "he held the fort with a diminishing following for years until his health made the task impossible" (p. 219). German bombs destroyed the building in 1941 (the reviewer saw it in this condition in September, 1945). It was rebuilt on a smaller scale in 1959; and then began a ten-year decline to practically a handful of people (cf. Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon* [Chicago: Moody, 1984] 243). Since 1970, however, it has been the center of a significant teaching and outreach ministry led by Peter Masters. The present reviewer was privileged to participate in the School of Theology as well as pulpit ministries there in 1980, 1982, 1983, and 1984 and appreciates the firm doctrinal position of the Tabernacle leaders today.

While *Lamplighter and Son* exhibits significant biographical depth (Skinner's ten years of research are manifest in the sometimes lengthy 616 endnotes and 36 pages of photographs), the value is somewhat tarnished by "imaginative reconstruction of inner thoughts and private conversations" (Foreword by Barrington R. White; cf. p. 223). Furthermore, it is disappointing to find theological compromise in such crucial areas as the inerrancy of Scripture.

As an Australian, Skinner has had access to many facts and photos of the places where Thomas Spurgeon lived and ministered from 1877 to 1893 in Australia and especially in New Zealand. He also provides fascinating insights into the lives of other prominent Christian leaders of those days who were connected with or influenced by the Spurgeon family, such as Dwight L. Moody, Ira D. Sankey, Henry Varley, George Muller, Joseph Parker, F. B. Meyer, Alexander Maclaren, Sam Jones, R. A. Torrey, Charles M. Alexander, J. Wilbur Chapman, John McNeill, and Gipsev Smith.

Skinner gives special attention to the ministry of A. C. Dixon (1854-1925), an American disciple of C. H. Spurgeon who served as pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle from 1911 to 1919. According to Skinner, Dixon, a Southern Baptist, set the pattern for "the original" Fundamentalism, "a moderate (thoughtful, sensible, sensitive) positive defense of orthodoxy, without any extremism," through his editing and publishing (with the financial backing of Lyman Stewart and Milton Stewart) of *The Fundamentals*, twelve paper booklets, three million copies of which were distributed worldwide (p. 206).

In these booklets, Dixon discussed "the supernatural authority of the Bible without utilizing inerrancy and infallibility as rallying points essential for belief in inspiration" (p. 207). In those days "many simply did not accept the fact that a commitment to absolute infallibility and inerrancy was essential for fellowship, or even right doctrine. Inspiration was the test, not any particular hard-line interpretation of the meaning of inspiration" (p. 207). Skinner concludes that "the current (neo) evangelical resurgence of today is a return to original perspectives" (p. 207). To him, men like E. J. Carnell, Bernard Ramm, H. J. Ockenga, and Billy Graham have "led the way to a new day in transdenominational fellowship, and promoted a social ethic that allowed for the highest commitment to biblical inspiration and authority without . . . bibliolatry" (p. 206).

In labeling the doctrine of the inerrancy of the divine autographs as an extreme position (even "bibliolatry"), Skinner reflects the institutionally powerful "moderate" (neo-evangelical to neo-orthodox) wing of Southern Baptists today. He offers no biblical/exegetical support for his "moderate" view of Scripture, exemplifying the alarming trend among neo-evangelical theologians today to ignore the implications of the teachings of Christ and the apostles on this vital subject (e.g., Matt 5:18; John 10:35; and 2 Pet 1:21). Furthermore, Skinner evidences no awareness of the widely-publicized *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* issued in 1978, six years before the publication of this book.

Many who believe that every word in the biblical autographs was *theopneustos* (God-breathed—2 Tim 3:16), and who also believe that Spurgeon

preached this truth, will be surprised to find him and his son Thomas positioned on the inspiration issue with Karl Barth. Barth, we are told, adopted the "functional-infallibility perspective" toward Scripture, as opposed to "the total inerrancy position (correct in all scientific and historical details)," of modern fundamentalism, which can be described as "an evidence-judgment perspective" (p. 236). D. L. Moody, R. A. Torrey, and Billy Graham, as well as the Spurgeons, should be identified with Barth's position, not the fundamentalist position, according to Skinner.

Helmut Thielicke, "one of our most erudite contemporary German theologians" (p. 233), though well known today for his rejection of biblical inerrancy (cf. his *Between Heaven and Earth* [New York: Harper and Row, 1965] 33-34) is likewise upheld as a model thinker on this vital issue. "C. H. Spurgeon consistently appears to treat inspiration as a *result*. . . . Helmut Thielicke defines the real secret of Spurgeon's power as centering exactly on this understanding." But this is precisely the tragedy and danger of neo-orthodoxy. The Bible is viewed as being "infallible" (or even "inerrant") *only to the extent that it speaks to man's heart*, and thus produces a spiritual "result." This is apparently how Skinner can endorse Herschel H. Hobbs's explanation of the Southern Baptist confession of 1963 (the Bible is "without any mixture of error"): "while Southern Baptists hold to the inerrancy of the Scriptures, their infallibility rests upon the fact that they do what they are designed to do" (p. 234).

As for Charles Haddon Spurgeon himself, Skinner is quite sure that he understood biblical infallibility simply "as meaning that there was an unfailing confidence in the Scripture's ability to fulfill the purposes for which it was created, chiefly, the 'making wise unto salvation' purpose. There is no discussion of the historical/scientific accuracy/inerrancy question in all of Spurgeon's convictions regarding inspiration" (p. 255).

It seems to the present reviewer that Skinner has failed to substantiate the above mentioned claims. What is known of Charles Haddon Spurgeon's strong stand for the Word of God during the dismal "Downgrade Controversy" in his final years (cf. chap. 6 in Iain H. Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* [London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973]) would surely have put him on the side of those today, a hundred years later, who are involved in an even more intense controversy against those in the Southern Baptist Convention and elsewhere who are denying the truth of the Bible (cf. Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976] 89-105).

In *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim have made a similar attempt to line up great Christian witnesses of past centuries in opposition to the supposedly recent and novel "Princeton-Warfield" view of biblical inerrancy. The superficial scholarship displayed in this work has been carefully exposed by such theologians as John D. Woodbridge (*Biblical Authority* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982]; cf. J. D. Woodbridge and Randall H. Balmer, "The Princetonians and Biblical Authority," in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983]). Even Clark Pinnock, no great friend of biblical inerrancy, has admitted that Woodbridge "dealt their thesis a deadly blow" because "Rogers/McKim

climbed so far out on a limb only to have it cut off behind them" (Review of Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* in *TSF Bulletin* 7:1 [September-October, 1983] 31).

The fact that C. H. Spurgeon and Thomas Spurgeon did not spell out in exact late-twentieth century theological terms their convictions concerning the infallibility of the Bible does not mean that they would side with the anti-inerrancy position of Karl Barth, Helmut Thielicke, and numerous Southern Baptist theologians today. To imply that they would do so is neither fair nor honest in the light of historical facts. Skinner asserts that "there is no discussion of the historical/scientific accuracy/inerrancy question in all of Spurgeon's convictions regarding inspiration" (p. 255). But this is a serious blunder. Note, for example, the following statement by Spurgeon:

The thoughts of God are in no degree perverted by being uttered in the words of men. The testimony of God, on the human as well as the divine side, is perfect and infallible; and however others may think of it, we shall not cease to believe in it with all our heart and soul. *The Holy Spirit has made no mistake, either in history, physics, theology, or anything else.* God is a greater Scientist than any of those who assume that title. If the human side had tainted the lesser statements we could not be sure of the greater. . . . But the human side has communicated no taint whatever to Holy Scripture [*Sword and Trowel* (1889) 551; quoted in L. R. Bush and T. J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 251; emphasis added].

See also C. H. Spurgeon's statement on inerrancy quoted in Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (p. 64 in the 1966 edition and p. 56 in 1973 edition). *Lamplighter and Son* must therefore be placed, sadly, among the many works that have "passed along to mankind the concept of a personality somewhat weaker than the real Spurgeon. . . . Because his burning earnestness and unyielding theological convictions are so little known it is assumed that he was much like the average evangelical of today" (Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon*, author's preface).

With Skinner's credibility as a theologian and a historian deeply shaken by these considerations, what may be said of his perspectives concerning the Spurgeons and premillennialism? Although Skinner now serves as professor of preaching at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary (Southern Baptist) in San Francisco, he did serve for several years (1979-1982) as professor of practical theology at a premillennial institution, Biola University/Talbot Theological Seminary. Nevertheless, he expresses great antipathy toward "the prima donnas of premillennialism" (p. 207) and their "eschatological encrustations" (p. 206), never pausing to explain or justify these heavy accusations. He is quite sure that it was William Bell Riley who "added inerrancy and premillennialism to [the Fundamentalist] creed" about 1921 (p. 210). However, by continually linking premillennialism with inerrancy as the twin enemies of "the older Fundamentalism" (cf. p. 205), Skinner inadvertently focuses the attention of his more theologically conservative readers upon premillennial eschatology as a possible result of interpreting the Bible carefully and consistently.

Skinner asserts that Spurgeon and his son did not identify with premillennialism a hundred years ago in England. To some extent that may be true, especially with regard to the Plymouth Brethren movement. But the

difference between Spurgeon and Skinner in this respect is quite profound. In the nineteenth century, premillennialism was only beginning to re-emerge from fifteen hundred years of Augustinian and Roman Catholic suppression. Some of the earliest successors of the apostles, such as Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian were clearly premillennial (see full discussion in George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 3 vols. [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952]). One investigator has concluded that

there [was] a general belief throughout all the [early church] periods investigated that Christ will some time in the future establish a kingdom in which he and the saints of God would reign. . . . The kingdom will be established after the resurrection of the righteous and those who give a length to the kingdom state that it will last for a thousand years [Charles A. Hauser, Jr., "The Eschatology of the Early Church Fathers (unpublished Th.D. diss.; Winona Lake, Indiana: Grace Theological Seminary, 1961) 228].

Spurgeon was largely self-taught in the Scriptures, and concentrated mostly on the writings of Calvin and the English Puritans. But today, theologians in the United States such as Skinner have immediate access to many more carefully written studies on premillennial eschatology than did Spurgeon. Even in Spurgeon's day, however, Henry Alford (1810–71), the dean of Canterbury, in his monumental four-volume edition of the Greek New Testament, insisted that the thousand-year reign of Christ following his Second Coming as described in Revelation 20 be understood literally. Six different times and in three different contexts the apostle John refers to this period as lasting "one thousand years." In the light of such exegetical facts, Alford wrote

I cannot consent to distort words from their plain sense and chronological place in the prophecy, on account of . . . any risk of abuses which the doctrine of the millennium may bring with it. Those who lived next to the Apostles, and the whole Church for 300 years, understood them in the plain literal sense; and it is a strange sight in these days [1860] to see expositors who are among the first in reverence of antiquity, complacently casting aside the most cogent instance of consensus which primitive antiquity presents. . . . If the second [resurrection] is literal, then so is the first, which in common with the whole primitive Church and many of the best modern expositors, I do maintain, and receive as an article of faith and hope [*The Greek New Testament* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894) 732, commenting on Rev 20:4–6].

Evidently, Spurgeon was not really opposed to premillennial teaching. He himself "expected a personal reign of Christ from Jerusalem" (p. 79), and warmly welcomed Dwight L. Moody to his pulpit, knowing that he was "clearly premillennial in eschatology" (p. 174). Others whom he welcomed to his pulpit, such as A. T. Pierson and A. C. Dixon, were also premillennial. Furthermore, he was willing to sign an Evangelical Baptist "statement of doctrine which closed with an affirmation of the pre-millennial Advent" (p. 79). This statement (*The Sword and Trowel* [1891] 446) concluded: "Our hope is the Personal Pre-millennial Return of the Lord Jesus in glory" (cf. Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* [1966 edition] 220).

Why did Charles Haddon Spurgeon sign a premillennial document? Skinner, evidently perplexed by this fact, states, in the words of a student in the Pastor's College, "If he had drawn it up himself I very much doubt if he would have inserted that sentence" (p. 79). Perhaps so. But there is a much more probable explanation available; namely, that he respected premillennialism for its literal approach to biblical prophecy, but did not feel adequately qualified to expound on it. Spurgeon was well aware of his own growth in knowledge in certain doctrinal areas. For example, Spurgeon wrote, "The reader will, perhaps, remark considerable progress in some of the sentiments here made public, particularly in the case of the doctrine of the Second Coming of our Lord; but he will remember that he who is learning truth will learn it by degrees, and if he teaches as he learns, it is to be expected that his lessons will become fuller every day" (*The Early Years 1834-54*, vol. 1 of *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography* [Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976] 395).

Iain Murray sees much ambiguity in Spurgeon's prophetic views, disillusioned as he must have been at times by some extreme statements of contemporary preachers (*The Puritan Hope* [Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975] 261-62). Nevertheless, Murray observes that a "premillennial belief remained with Spurgeon throughout his ministry, [and] is expressed in some of the closing sermons of his life" (p. 257). "On one occasion he does speak of two future resurrections separated by an interval of time" (p. 259). Occasionally "he would proclaim a premillennial appearing in such terms that one might assume he had repudiated all his many statements on the other side" (p. 263). Murray finds it "not surprising" that "the premillennial hope came more to the fore in Spurgeon's closing years" (p. 264). In the light of all these considerations, the reviewer speculates that *if* Spurgeon and his son were living and preaching in the United States today, where the majority of baptistic fundamentalists are strongly committed to premillennialism, and where an abundance of scholarly premillennial commentaries and theologies are available, they *might* also be identified with those who believe that Scripture teaches a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth following his Second Advent and the literal accomplishment of all his promises to ethnic Israel in spite of all her sins as a stupendous testimony to his sovereign grace.

In conclusion, Skinner has performed a service to the Church in bringing to light little known documents concerning the life and ministry of C. H. Spurgeon's son Thomas and of A. C. Dixon, a later pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. But he has done a disservice to one of the greatest pastor-teachers of all Christian history, and thus to the Christ whom he faithfully served, by raising serious questions concerning the absolute and plenary inerrancy of the biblical autographs and by implying that Spurgeon (and his son) were similarly ambivalent on this foundational fact of special revelation.

May the publication of a book like this provoke some faithful theologian and historian, under the providence of God, to a write the long-awaited, truly definitive study of the life and doctrines of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, for the encouragement of God's servants in our day.