

The Ecclesiology of Charles H. Spurgeon: Unity, Orthodoxy, and Denominational Identity¹

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Charles Haddon Spurgeon established his ecclesiology squarely on the experience of regeneration or new birth. His commitment to the centrality of regeneration shaped his ecclesiology from local polity to evangelical union. His religious identity was first and foremost in broad evangelical dissent. His diminished ecclesiology reflected that of Victorian-era evangelicalism.

His ecclesiology comprised his views of local church polity, Baptist denominationalism, and evangelical unity. Spurgeon based his broad cooperation with other dissenters on the foundation of regeneration. He worked for evangelical unity among Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and evangelical Anglicans. All who were born again were members of the church of Jesus Christ. They were, in fact, one body.

Spurgeon's local church polity included three commitments: regenerate church membership, believer's baptism, and congregational church polity. Spurgeon sought to organize his church, London's Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle, on these principles. He thought all three were revealed in the Scriptures, but regeneration was the only essential element of local church polity. Congregational polity, and especially believer's baptism, promoted regenerate church membership, but regeneration alone defined the church.

Spurgeon's Baptist identity grew from his commitment to regeneration. He believed that believer's baptism and cooperation promoted regeneration. On this broad platform he participated in such Baptist organizations as the Baptist Union, the cooperative agency of

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British Particular and General Baptists roughly similar to the missionary conventions of the Southern and Northern Baptists of the same period. In 1887, Spurgeon resigned from the Baptist Union because the group tolerated modernist ministers in its membership. Modernism, Spurgeon believed, undermined regeneration. He altered his Baptist denominationalism to protect regeneration.

When Spurgeon withdrew from the Baptist Union and stood for orthodoxy, American Baptists applauded. Before about 1880, American Baptists based their ecclesiology in large part on their denominational distinctives. Many American Baptists therefore were uncertain of Spurgeon's claim to Baptist identity because he taught open communion. As modernism grew more popular, American Baptists based their ecclesiology increasingly on evangelical essentials.

When Spurgeon withdrew, they therefore hailed him as a great Baptist champion. They altered their estimate of him because their ecclesiology changed under pressure from modernism and approached his.

Local Church Polity

Spurgeon held that the polity of the church was a matter of revelation, not of expediency. Christ commissioned the apostles to establish the church according to a specific pattern. All churches are obligated to follow this pattern. "The tabernacle in the wilderness was framed after the pattern which God gave to Moses in the mount; and, verily, Christ's Church is built after God's own model." Pastors may not alter it; they may merely manage it faithfully. They were stewards of the apostolic model. "Some may talk of a liberal polity in their church," Spurgeon said. "Let them be liberal with what is their own; but for a steward to boast of being liberal with his Master's good, is quite another matter."²

Spurgeon insisted that Christ required the churches to admit only regenerate persons. The Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle went to

² Spurgeon, "The Church of God and the Truth of God" (14 September 1856), in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1978) [hereafter MTP, 54:243; Spurgeon, "Stewards," in *An All-Around Ministry* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1900), 264.

great lengths to admit to membership persons who gave credible evidence of regeneration. Candidates for membership applied to the elders on any Wednesday evening. The elders examined the candidate's profession of faith and if satisfied entered his or her name on the candidate list. The associate pastor, Charles's brother, James A. Spurgeon, then met each candidate and likewise inquired into their conversion. If satisfied, he appointed someone to visit and inquire about the "moral character and repute of the candidate." If the candidate had a good reputation, he or she attended the next church conference. The moderator, ordinarily Spurgeon, questioned the candidate in the presence of the congregation in order "to elicit expressions of his trust in the Lord Jesus, and hope of salvation through his blood, and any such facts of his spiritual history as may convince the church of the genuineness of the case." The candidate withdrew, the visitor reported on the candidate's moral reputation, and the church voted. Although the Tabernacle's process was more involved than most Baptist churches, Baptists traditionally examined the testimony and character of applicants before admitting them to membership.³

Spurgeon insisted also that Christ required the churches to baptize those only who professed faith in Christ. The Tabernacle practiced "strict membership"- they admitted to membership those regenerate persons who had been immersed after a profession of faith. Some Baptist churches practiced "open membership" allowing unimmersed believers to join. Spurgeon insisted, however, on "having none but persons who had been baptized in the membership of the Church. . . . He would rather give up the pastorate than admit any man to the Church who was not obedient to his Lord's command." Christ commanded those who believed in him to submit to immersion. Spurgeon made obedience to this command a condition of membership because this was the apostolic practice.⁴

Spurgeon insisted finally that Christ required congregational church government or independency. Each congregation should govern

³ James A. Spurgeon, "Discipline of the Church at the Metropolitan Tabernacle," *Sword and Trowel*, 5 (1869): 53-54.

⁴ Spurgeon expressed his views on baptism in many places. See, e.g., his *Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society [1897-1900]), 1:147-55; Spurgeon, in "Meeting of Our Own Church" (April 8, 1861), in *MTP*, 7:260.

itself independently from all other churches or church hierarchies. Each church was autonomous and capable in itself of exercising all the functions of a church of Christ. The members of the church jointly exercised church power - Christ delegated final authority to the congregation. "The independency of Scripture is to be practiced still," Spurgeon taught. "Each church is to be separate . . . without being disturbed by the opinion of any other church." Each church made its own decisions, Spurgeon taught. "I believe in the glorious principle of Independency. Every church has a right to choose its own minister."⁵

Spurgeon taught that the New Testament specified the basic organization of each congregation. According to Scripture each church should have a pastor who was the overseer or bishop of the congregation. He was the "captain of a vessel and led the church by counsel, instruction in the Scriptures, and godly example. He also ruled the church in its meetings, discipline, and institutions, by exerting his influence and initiating action."⁶

Spurgeon did not, however, believe in ordination. This sentiment had been growing among English Baptists for about a generation. Since each church governed itself, it was fully authorized to choose and install its own ministers. Ordination ceremonies involved gathering a council of pastors who formally examined and commissioned a candidate as an authorized minister of the gospel. Such a ceremony, Spurgeon held, implicitly denied congregational authority and implied apostolic succession by delegating ministerial authority from one minister to another. Spurgeon added that churches do not in fact have authority to ordain ministers: "God alone ordains ministers; all that the Church can do is to recognize them."⁷

⁵ Spurgeon, "The Church of God and the Truth of God," MTP 54:242; Spurgeon, Letter to Mr. James Low, 2 May 1854, in *Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon*, 1:357.

⁶ Spurgeon, "A Meeting of Our Own Church," MTP, 7:257; James A. Spurgeon, "Discipline of the Church at the Metropolitan Tabernacle," *Sword and Trowel*: 50-51.

⁷ Spurgeon, Letter to Mr. James Low, May 2, 1854, *Autobiography*, 1:356-57; Spurgeon, "The Holy Spirit Glorifying Christ" (17 August 1862), in MTP, 8:459. On ordination practices, see J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot, England: Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 86-87.

Spurgeon taught that each church should also have a body of elders. In 1869, his church had twenty-six elders elected by the congregation upon nomination by the elders. Most Baptist churches had no such elders. The Tabernacle's elders counseled persons who inquired about the way of salvation; visited and examined candidates for church membership; sought out absentee members; cared for the sick and troubled; conducted prayer meetings, catechesis classes, and Bible studies; and oversaw the congregation's missionary and church planting efforts.

Spurgeon taught finally that each church should have a body of deacons. In 1869 the Metropolitan Tabernacle had nine. They had responsibility to care for the needs of the ministers, help the poor of the church, manage the church's property and finances, and provide for orderly worship. Both elders and deacons had responsibility to maintain the purity of the church by looking into matters of church discipline. Spurgeon believed this arrangement was scriptural polity and referred to it as a "modified form of Episcopalian Presbyterian Independency."⁸

Spurgeon believed that the Bible required each church to exercise discipline. Christ designed the church to be separate from the world. Christ instructed the churches to protect their purity in both doctrine and practice through the exercise of discipline. Immorality could not be tolerated. The design of discipline was to restore the wayward to righteousness: "The object of church discipline should always be the good of the person who has to endure it." Those who committed outward offenses received rebuke, and if they did not repent, the church excluded them to preserve the purity of the fellowship. "If we know that members are living in gross sin," Spurgeon said, "and do not deal with them either by way of censure or excommunication, in accordance with the teaching of Christ and his apostles, we become accomplices in their sin." When members of the Tabernacle acted immorally, the elders corrected them privately; when necessary they laid it "before the church, and recommend

⁸ James A. Spurgeon, "Discipline of the Church at the Metropolitan Tabernacle," *Sword and Trowel* 52; Charles H. Spurgeon, "A Divided Heart" (25 September 1859), in *MTP* 5:413; Spurgeon, in "A Meeting of Our Own Church," *MTP*, 7:257.

the course of procedure to be adopted, whether censure or excommunication.”⁹

In worship his approach was outwardly like that of the Puritans. The service had the preaching of the word at its center. The congregation sang without a musical accompaniment and had no choir. Spurgeon's reasons for rejecting organs and choirs were different, however, from those of the Puritans. The Puritans believed that Christ prohibited such because He approved only those forms of worship which He commissioned His apostles to establish. Spurgeon seemed to think them unspiritual, worldly, and superficial additions rather than violations of the apostolic model.¹⁰

Baptist Denominationalism

Spurgeon rooted his understanding of Baptist denominationalism in a common commitment to believer's baptism. He supported denominational cooperation with those evangelicals who practiced the immersion of professing believers. He frequently attended the meetings of the Baptist Union, the cooperative organization of British Particular Baptists roughly similar to the Southern or Northern Baptist Convention. He supported its efforts to raise money for its various causes. He sometimes supported the Baptist Missionary Society, the most successful of the Particular Baptists' cooperative ventures. He was instrumental in the re-establishment of the London Baptist Association and was active in its meetings.

Spurgeon's denominational cooperation came from commitment to promoting denominational prosperity. He labored for the spread of Baptist churches throughout the nation. He sought to assist other Baptists in all prudent ways. He cooperated because of his ecclesiological commitment to believer's baptism. But the Baptist organizations needed him more than he needed them. Spurgeon's Metropolitan Baptist Tabernacle was in many ways a denomination unto

⁹ Spurgeon, "Serving the Lord" (15 August 1869), in MTP, 15:453; Spurgeon, "Accomplices in Sin" (30 March 1873), in MTP, 53:427; James A. Spurgeon, "Discipline of the Church at the Metropolitan Tabernacle," 54.

¹⁰ See Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Kregel: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992), 351.

itself. The church supported wide-ranging evangelistic activity. Its elders engaged in preaching at its distant chapels. It organized many new chapels and churches. It coordinated a large association of evangelist-preachers. It engaged colporteurs to distribute Bibles, devotional literature, and evangelistic tracts throughout the land. The church established a college to train ministers. The church engaged in benevolent activity on a remarkable scale. It established an orphanage and aided the poor in other ways. The church published religious literature. The New Park Street Pulpit and its successor the Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit published Spurgeon's sermons weekly and disseminated them widely. Through its monthly magazine, the *Sword and Trowel*, it promoted its causes and programs—conversion, believer's baptism, missions, evangelism, and benevolence. It possessed all the earmarks of a denomination: large-scale publishing, missionary activity, theological education, and social benevolence.

After the down-grade controversy, Spurgeon lost confidence in denominational unions. He did not oppose them in principle. He argued, however, that they ought to bind themselves confessionally to broad evangelical orthodoxy. When other separatist-minded Baptists urged him to form a new denomination, he refused. "There are denominations enough," he replied. He reasoned also that a new denomination would not be any safer than the old - heretics could enter a new one as well as an old.¹¹

Evangelical Unity

Spurgeon regarded evangelical unity based on regeneration the most important of his ecclesiological commitments. Local church polity and denominational cooperation were not as important. In Spurgeon's presidential address to the 1872 conference of the Pastor's College, he enumerated the various doctrines that make up the content of the Christian faith. He included belief in God, who created the universe and who is sovereign, faithful, and true; belief in Christ, the incarnate God who suffered on the cross to make atonement for our sin; and belief in

¹¹ Spurgeon, "A Fragment on the Down Grade Controversy," *Sword and Trowel* 23 (1887): 560.

God the Holy Spirit, who empowers the word of God for the salvation of sinners. But he did not include belief in the church.¹²

Spurgeon depreciated the importance of local church and denominational ecclesiology. Most earlier British Baptists and most contemporary American Baptists reversed Spurgeon's ecclesiological priorities. But Spurgeon sought first to promote evangelical unity, and his ecclesiology aided him. Evangelicals differed in polity and doctrine. Baptists and Independents practiced congregational church government; Presbyterians placed government in the joint eldership of many congregations; Episcopalians granted the rule to bishops. Many Baptists, Presbyterians, Independents, and Episcopalians adhered to such Calvinist doctrines as eternal, personal election, effectual calling, and particular redemption. Methodists and many other dissenters adhered to the Arminian alternatives.

Spurgeon reasoned that no denomination had all the truth, and none had perfected church polity. "I am persuaded that neither the Church of England, nor the Wesleyans, nor the Independents, nor the Baptists, have got all the truth. ... I would persuade you, my Baptist friends, that your system is not perfect." Nor could church polity prevent heresy and spiritual death. "You cannot, by Presbytery, or Independency, or Episcopacy, secure the life of the Church." Ecclesiology did not preserve spiritual life in a denomination, but the "presence of the Lord" in its midst.¹³

These differences might require separate denominational organizations, but they did not damage the unity of faith, because they were not the grand essentials of the soul's salvation. Spurgeon argued that the differences that divided evangelicals were unscriptural human inventions. These human traditions must fall before the authority of the Bible. "You shall have thrown before you the tenets of Independency, and the minutes of the Wesleyan Conference, or some dogma of close communion or open communion of the Baptist Church. To the dogs with it all! What matters it all - what rules and regulations we may pass?" Such doctrines were secondary.¹⁴

¹² Spurgeon, "Faith," in *An All-Around Ministry*, 12-19.

¹³ Spurgeon, "Things Unknown" (1858), in MTP, 46:105; Spurgeon, "Christ Is Glorious - Let Us Make Him Known" (20 March 1864), in MTP, 10:163.

¹⁴ Spurgeon, "The Family Likeness," in MTP, 61:515.

Spurgeon's view of the church encouraged his emphasis on evangelical unity. He held that there was only one church and it comprised all believers. The universal church was both visible and invisible. The invisible referred to the regenerating work of the Spirit hidden from human eyes. The visible church referred to the work of the Spirit as made visible by the profession and department of believers. Since the church comprised all believers, ecclesiological differences had little importance. There were many denominations, but only one church.¹⁵

Spurgeon based his commitment to open communion on this broad ecclesiology. It is perhaps the best known of Spurgeon's ecclesiological principles. He held that the only proper qualification for participating in the Lord's Supper was conversion. Hence he invited all who believed in Jesus to receive the bread and wine. Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, whether immersed on a profession of faith or sprinkled as infants, were all welcome if only they were born again.

During Spurgeon's lifetime, few Baptist churches in America practiced open communion, but most in England did. Many practiced open membership as well - they admitted persons to membership based on their profession of faith alone, whether they had submitted to believer's baptism or not. Open communion Baptists in England claimed an impressive heritage. John Bunyan, the great Baptist preacher of Bedford, whose *Pilgrim's Progress* was and remains a devotional classic, practiced open communion and ably defended his practice. In the early nineteenth century, Robert Hall Jr., the brilliant and eloquent Baptist preacher whose writing brought him extensive fame, persuasively defended open communion views. Baptist Noel, the immensely popular Baptist preacher whose defection from the clergy of the Church of England brought considerable notoriety, promoted open communion from his prominent London pulpit.

Spurgeon's church combined open communion with strict membership. The combination reflected well his commitment to evangelical unity and believer's baptism. Spurgeon's zeal for evangelism encouraged his commitment to evangelical unity. Questions about

¹⁵ Spurgeon, "The Church of God and the Truth of God," MTP 54:242-243; Spurgeon, in "A Public Meeting of the Various Denominations" (3 April 1861), in MTP, 7:242.

predestination, believer's baptism, and church government did not contribute to evangelistic effectiveness. "If you speak to a man about his soul, he will ask you, 'Are you an Arminian or a Calvinist?' To this we reply, 'Dear fellow, are you saved?' 'Well,' he says, 'what is your opinion in reference to baptism?' 'Our answer is ready enough, for we see the Lord's will plainly enough in his Word, but we beg you to think more of Jesus than of ordinances.' 'But,' says the caviler, 'are you Presbyterian in church polity, or do you favor Episcopacy?' 'Dear friend, what has that to do with you? Have you passed from death unto life?'" The doctrines and polities that separated evangelicals were secondary matters. All doctrine was important, Spurgeon affirmed, but the doctrines necessary for the salvation of sinners constituted the immovable fundamentals.¹⁶

Although Spurgeon boldly asserted the truth of Calvinism, this also was secondary, because saving sinners was more essential than commitment to the five points of Calvinism: "To swing to and fro on a five-barred gate, is not progress; yet some seem to think that it is.... Our one aim is to save sinners." John Gill, the seventeenth-century high Calvinist whom Spurgeon much admired, also said that the salvation of sinners should be the primary aim and activity of ministers. But Spurgeon's rhetoric suggests an antithesis between doctrine and activity that Gill rejected. Spurgeon in fact rejected it too, but his language reflected his belief that the fundamental orthodoxy consisted of the doctrines necessary for salvation.¹⁷

In this context Spurgeon appears a poor sectarian and a weak fundamentalist. He trusted the orthodoxy of evangelical dissent. "We are not to be always going about the world searching out heresies, like terrier dogs sniffing for rats, and to be always so confident of our own infallibility that we erect ecclesiastical stakes at which to [figuratively] roast all who differ from us." His concern was for the unity of evangelicals bound together by the experience of regeneration.¹⁸

¹⁶ Spurgeon, "Questions of the Day and the Question of the Day" (26 January 1873), in MTP, 19:55.

¹⁷ Spurgeon, "Forward," in *An All-Around Ministry*, 62. On Gill's views, see my "A Fire That Burns Within: The Spirituality of John Gill," in Michael A. G. Haykin, ed., *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697-1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 206.

¹⁸ Spurgeon, "Forward," in *An All-Around Ministry*, 55.

Orthodoxy, Unity, and Denominational Identity

At the same time that Spurgeon was committed to broad evangelical unity he was committed to purity of faith and practice, to orthodoxy and separation from the world. He held that Christians should never compromise divine truth through an alliance with error. Believers' baptism, for example was not a fundamental truth, Spurgeon held, but Baptist preachers must teach it. Preachers must advocate every truth revealed in the Bible, no matter how trivial. "The omission of a doctrine, or an ordinance, or a precept, may prove highly injurious. Even points which others think trivial must not be trivial to the man who would make full proof of his ministry. Do not, for instance, fail to be faithful upon believers' baptism."¹⁹

Since Christ was the head of the Church, preachers could not ignore any command of Christ. They should not omit any of Christ's known rules, not even the divisive rules concerning baptism and the Lord's Supper. "I am sorry," Spurgeon said, "that there are disputes in the Church as to baptism and the Lord's Supper; but it is not a moot point in the Church of Christ whether baptism and the Lord's Supper are to be practiced at all. How, then, can these ordinances be set aside by those who admit that they are Scriptural?"²⁰

In the down-grade controversy, Spurgeon expressed his commitment to orthodoxy in no uncertain terms. Many dissenting ministers embraced modernist theology. Spurgeon judged that modernists rejected the essentials of the soul's salvation. To unite with those who denied the fundamentals was to participate in their rebellion against Christ. Modernists invented a new religion, Spurgeon said, in which "the Atonement is scouted, the inspiration of Scripture is derided, the Holy Spirit is degraded into an influence, the punishment of sin is turned into fiction, and the resurrection into a myth."²¹ Spurgeon desired union among all believers on the platform of the essential saving truths of the gospel. But he held that modernism denied these essential truths. No union with modernism was possible because it could not be based on

¹⁹ Spurgeon, "How To Meet the Evils of the Age," in *An All-Around Ministry*, 118.

²⁰ Spurgeon, "The Minister in These Times," in *An All-Around Ministry*, 385.

²¹ Spurgeon, "Another Word Concerning the Down Grade," *Sword and Trowel* 23 (1887): 397.

the essential doctrines. Spurgeon wanted union, but not at the expense of essential truth. He pleaded for "love of truth as well as love of union." But "to pursue union at the expense of truth is treason to the Lord Jesus." Unions of orthodox evangelicals with modernists were not Christian unions, Spurgeon judged, but 'Confederacies of Evil.'²²

Spurgeon distinguished between essential and nonessential doctrines. The essential doctrines were the deity of Christ, the plenary inspiration of the Bible, substitutionary atonement, justification by faith, and sanctification. The ecclesiological doctrines of regenerate church membership, congregational government, and believer's baptism were revealed - Christ commanded them. But they were nonessential. But even nonessential doctrines were important, Spurgeon held. Errors in nonessentials did not hinder salvation, but they were obstacles to individual piety and church prosperity. Baptism, for example, was nonessential for Spurgeon because persons could be saved whether they endorsed infant baptism or believer's baptism.

Spurgeon's zeal for evangelism encouraged his commitment to orthodoxy. The reason that orthodoxy was absolutely important was that it was foundational to salvation. Heresy destroyed the power of the gospel for salvation because it perverted the truths at the heart of the gospel. "Conformity, or nonconformity, per se is nothing; but a new creature is everything, and the truth upon which alone that new creature can live is worth dying a thousand deaths to conserve."²³

Spurgeon worked for evangelical unity and separated from the Baptist Union on the same basis. Regeneration was the basis of evangelical unity. But when modernists rejected doctrines essential to salvation, they undermined the gospel itself and hindered regeneration. Since union was based on regeneration, Spurgeon could not unite with those who in practice opposed it.

²² Spurgeon, "Notes," *Sword and Trowel* 23 (1887): 196; Spurgeon, "A Fragment upon the Down-Grade Controversy," *Sword and Trowel* 23 (1887): 558.

²³ Spurgeon, "Another Word concerning the Down Grade," *Sword and Trowel* 23 (1887): 399.

Spurgeon's Baptist Identity and American Baptists

Before the down-grade controversy, Baptists in the United States expressed ambivalence toward Spurgeon. They generally appreciated his zealous evangelism and robust Calvinism. But the fact that he taught and practiced open communion gave them pause. Some sought to excuse him and pointed to mitigating circumstances. But many thought him a good evangelical but an unsound Baptist for his communion practices. Such judges regarded him as they would an evangelical Methodist or Presbyterian - he was worthy of their respect and love as a faithful preacher and Christian brother, but not as a Baptist. His communion views discredited his Baptist identity.²⁴

The Columbia Baptist Association in South Carolina in 1859 called Spurgeon a "semi-Baptist" for his open communion views. The same year, and for the same reason, Joseph Walker, the editor of Georgia's Baptist Champion, judged that Baptists could not recognize Spurgeon as a "sound Baptist preacher." A writer to North Carolina's Biblical Recorder in the same manner argued that "Spurgeon is a great man but no Baptist." Joseph Otis, editor of Kentucky Baptists' Western Recorder, did not consider Spurgeon a Baptist at all in 1860. He classed "Spurgeonism" with "Beecherism" and relegated both "beyond the pale of the Baptist faith." He believed that most Baptists in America agreed with his evaluation.²⁵

²⁴ For examples of such pre-controversy praise, see Francis Wayland, "Spurgeon's Sermons," and E. T. Winkler, "Spurgeon," both in the Southern Baptist, 24 March 1857,2; E. B. Teague, "Rev. C. H. Spurgeon and His Theology," Christian Index, 9 October 1856, 162. For pre-controversy statements excusing Spurgeon's views, see D. R. Campbell, 'Letter from President D. R. Campbell,' Western Recorder, 26 September 1859,2; Joseph Walker, "Spurgeon of England," Christian Index, 4 February 1857,18 (Walker initially thought that Spurgeon practiced close communion); "Spurgeon and Close Communion," Baptist Courier, 8 May 1884, 1 (reprinted *ibid.*, 18 June 1885,2). For criticisms see below.

²⁵ Columbia Baptist Association, Minutes, 1859, 44; Joseph Walker, "Spurgeon's Fencing," Western Recorder, 31 October 1859, 2; Querist, "Is the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon a Baptist?" Biblical Recorder, 24 February 1859, 2; Joseph Otis, "Spurgeon on Church Government," Western Recorder, 21 January 1860; Otis, "Elder W. C. Buck's Views Respecting Spurgeon's Theory and Practice of Eucharistic Communion," Western Recorder, 11 February 1860, 2.

After the down-grade controversy, Baptists in America muted their criticisms of his open communion practices. In 1907, G. W. Gardner quoted John A. Broadus to enforce a claim that his open communion sentiment was an anomaly: 'I heard Dr. Broadus remark once that the statement made by Spurgeon to the effect that he had never given the communion question serious consideration was unworthy of Spurgeon.' Others argued that he hardly qualified as an open communionist. J. T. Christian, professor of church history at New Orleans Baptist Bible Institute (now New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary), made Spurgeon an honorary member of the close communion club in his 1892 book defending close communion.

After he proved that Spurgeon was wrong to invite unbaptized persons to the Lord's Table, he proceeded to enlist him as a close communionist. He quoted William E. Hatcher who in 1892 visited Spurgeon. Spurgeon confessed to Hatcher that "if I were to come to America to live, I would join a close communion church and conform myself to its practices on the Communion question." He quoted Cleveland Baptist minister W. A. Perrins, a recent graduate of Spurgeon's College who claimed that Spurgeon was "at heart a close communionist." Spurgeon confessed to Perrins that "if I had to begin my ministry again, I should certainly commence with a close-communion church. I am led to believe the American Baptists are right, but cannot alter the usages of my church, which have been of so long standing."²⁶

They now praised him primarily because he upheld orthodoxy. They overlooked or discounted his open communion views. Modernist theology was beginning to threaten all the evangelical denominations. Spurgeon opposed it forcefully. He separated from those Baptists and other dissenters who rejected the plenary inspiration of the scriptures and the substitutionary atonement. In the nomenclature introduced later, they respected him as a fellow fundamentalist.²⁷ Virginia preacher

²⁶ G. W. Gardner, "The Lord's Supper," *Baptist Courier*, 15 Aug. 1907, 5; John T. Christian, "Close Communion": Or, Baptism As a Pre-requisite to the Lord's Supper (Louisville, Kentucky: Baptist Book Concern, 1892), 243-44.

²⁷ Their respect for Spurgeon endured - Baptist newspapers reprinted his sermons for years after his death. For an estimate of his influence, see George W. Pruett's 1934 Albert Hall address (Truett, "C. H. Spurgeon Centenary," *Baptist Courier*, 30 August 1934, 8, 17, 22-23). Truett pointed particularly to

Robert Williamson, for example, appealed to Spurgeon for this reason. He was alarmed that modernist theology was spreading among Baptist preachers. Among “our young preachers just from the seminaries,” Williamson complained, the old theology was eclipsed and the “new theology bids fair to come into vogue.” But Spurgeon separated from the modernists and “left the Baptist Union on account of the new theology.” Williamson applauded him because he took a decided stand for orthodoxy.²⁸

Baptist newspaper editors applauded him likewise. T. T. Eaton, editor of *Kentucky Baptists' Western Recorder* and tireless inspector of theological credentials, saw Spurgeon's action as the proof of his orthodoxy. He was the “greatest man living,” Eaton wrote. When others questioned whether Spurgeon was still a Baptist, Eaton responded that “he is more of a Baptist today than ever before.” Eaton defended close communion doggedly throughout his career but seemed to indulge the error in Spurgeon. Perhaps Spurgeon would now adopt close communion, Eaton hoped.²⁹

The changing context of American religion precipitated the changed interpretation. Before about 1870, the pastors and theologians of the popular denominations shared a common belief in such evangelical essentials as the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, the necessity of repentance and faith, and the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. Few seriously challenged these fundamentals. But evangelicals challenged one another on such secondary truths as believer's baptism and church polity. Other denominations attacked the Baptists for their practice of close communion and believer's baptism. The defense of these two commitments in large part informed Baptist identity in the United States. Since Spurgeon rejected close communion, he was a marginal Baptist.

After 1870, the battle lines shifted dramatically. Many young pastors and theologians embraced modernism. In their own denominations, pastors and teachers challenged the central doctrines of

Spurgeon's twin commitment to Calvinism and evangelism as the source of his spiritual power.

²⁸ R. W. [Robert Williamson], “The Preacher's Library, etc.,” *Biblical Recorder*, 14 March 1888, 1.

²⁹ T. T. Eaton, “Mr. Spurgeon Again,” *Western Recorder*, 2 February 1888, 4; Eaton, “Rev. C. H. Spurgeon,” *Western Recorder*, 22 December 1887, 4.

the gospel. Baptists began to turn their attention to a defense of the fundamentals. This defense shaped a new Baptist identity. In this context Spurgeon passed muster - he was a true Baptist. American evangelicals did not mobilize against modernism until the early twentieth century. But many leaders raised the alarm between 1870 and 1900. The most visible expressions of the spread of the new theology among Baptists occurred in the South. In 1879 the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary forced the resignation of Crawford Howell Toy when he embraced the new theology's views of inspiration. Two years later, the Foreign Mission Board withdrew its appointment of John Stout and T. P. Bell when it learned that they adopted similar views.

The new threat facing evangelicals had little to do with ecclesiology. It jeopardized evangelicalism itself. It addressed the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith. Most evangelicals considered ecclesiology to be vital to the gospel. When therefore Spurgeon stood against the encroachments of new theology, American evangelicals applauded. Baptists who were becoming more concerned about modernism found in Spurgeon's example a heroic act to defend the fundamentals of the faith.

Before the down-grade controversy Spurgeon's identity was primarily in evangelical dissent. After the controversy, it was in a separatism based on assertion of the fundamental truths of traditional Protestantism. But in both modes, Spurgeon expressed little concern for ecclesiology compared to his predecessors. Ecclesiology was not a fundamental truth of eternal salvation. Nor did rigid attachment to modes of church government and the ordinances assist in the salvation of sinners. Ecclesiology passed neither the test of fundamental truth nor the test of evangelistic effectiveness. In these ways Spurgeon's career was an early example of how the identity of British and American evangelicals realigned under pressure from modernism. In the realignment evangelicals further diminished the role of ecclesiology in conservative Protestantism.