

## Church History (66): Charles Haddon Spurgeon: His later Years

Having considered his early life and world-wide ministry, we come this morning to his later years. We shall consider his sickness and depression, downgrade controversy, and death and legacy.

### I. Charles Haddon Spurgeon: His later Years

1. *Sickness and depression.* "For thirteen years up to 1867, Spurgeon was able to exert himself fully in the many ministries of the Tabernacle. "But in October of that year he suffered his first serious episode of illness, and for the next 24 years sustained regular bouts of vomiting, fever and considerable pain, with swelling and rigid pain in his limbs, and also extreme mental exhaustion. It was thought that he suffered from gout (following his grandfather), and congestion of the kidneys" (Wyncoll).<sup>1</sup> "After his 43<sup>rd</sup> year in 1877, his condition steadily worsened. He was far from a well man and his condition slowly deteriorated through the years" (Drummond).<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, "in 1879, he experienced a physical breakdown, the result of his excessive labor and responsibility. For five months he was absent from the Tabernacle" (Dallimore).<sup>3</sup> "Spurgeon started visiting the south of France from 1871 for a few weeks during the winter to alleviate the pain of his conditions. Once there, however, he did not stop his work. He would conduct morning prayers, sometimes with up to 60 people attending. He continued to edit *The Sword* and the *Trowel* magazine as well as continuing to work on many books, such as the seven-volume set *The Treasury of David*. He also preached, when well enough, at local churches" (Wyncoll).<sup>4</sup> Eventually these trips were extended to 4-6 weeks. "Almost every winter he was able to spend a month or six weeks at Mentone in southern France, and those periods of release from the damp and chill of England did much toward providing the health he needed to carry on with some measure of vigor during the rest of the year" (Dallimore).<sup>5</sup> Related to his ongoing health issues, Spurgeon also suffered with severe bouts of depression. This was the result of his physical weakness and the heavy responsibilities he bore.

All manner of persons came to him to pour into his ear the tale of their trials and to seek his advice. This was true of hundreds of the Tabernacle people but was especially true of the men of the College who had gone out into the ministry. There were problems in their churches to be met and decisions to be made, and they came, first to unburden themselves to him, and then to have him pray for them and assist them with his wise counsel. In addition, there was the great machine he had created—the Tabernacle and its associated organizations—to be maintained, all at tremendous cost. Truly he trusted the Lord, yet he also felt the strain of his burdens and having no one to whom he could fully unburden himself, he built up a sense of trial within his breast, and it gradually bore him down into severe depression. What he suffered in these times of darkness we may not know. They usually accompanied his days and nights of physical agony under the strength of a gout attack, and even his desperate calling upon God often brought him no relief. 'There are dungeons,' he said, 'beneath the Castle of Despair,' and he had often been in them.<sup>6</sup>

Spurgeon viewed his prolonged sicknesses as ultimately sent from God to humble him and drive him to Christ. He wrote in *The Sword and Trowel* in May 1876: "Mysterious are the visitations of sickness.

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Wyncoll, *The Suffering Letters of CH Spurgeon*, 9-10

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 583

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 164

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Wyncoll, *The Suffering Letters of CH Spurgeon*, 11-12

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 164

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 186

When the Lord is using a man for His glory it is remarkable that he should suddenly smite him down and suspend his usefulness. It must be right, but the reason for it does not lie near the surface. How is it that a heart eager for the welfare of men and the glory of God should find itself hampered by a sickly frame, and limited from its best usefulness by attacks of painful disease? We may ask the question (as long as we do so without murmuring), but who shall answer it for us?"<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon then suggested several reasons: (1) *to force us to trust Him*. "Is it not good for us to be nonplussed, puzzled, and forced to exercise our faith? Would it be good for us to have all things so ordered by God that we could see the reason for His every arrangement? Could the scheme of divine love be so supremely, infinitely, wise if we could measure it with our limited powers of reasoning? And would we not be as foolish and conceited as spoiled and over-petted children, if all things were arranged according to our judgment of what would be right and proper? Ah, it is good to be thrown out of our depth and made to swim in the sweet waters of mighty love! We know that it is supremely blessed to be compelled to cease from self, to surrender both desire and judgment, and to lie passive in the hands of God."<sup>8</sup> (2) *To humble us*. "It is of the utmost importance to us to be kept humble. Self-consciousness and self-importance make a hateful delusion, but one into which we fall as naturally as weeds grow on a dunghill. We cannot be used of the Lord but that we also dream of personal greatness. We think ourselves almost indispensable to the church, pillars of the cause, and foundations of the temple of God! We are nothings and nobodies, but that we think otherwise is very evident, for as soon as we are put on the shelf we begin anxiously to enquire, 'How will the work go on without me!' The fly on the coach wheel may just as well enquire, 'How will the mail be carried without me?'"<sup>9</sup> (3) *To enable us to sympathize with others*. "May not severe discipline fall to the lot of some to qualify them for their office of under-shepherds? How can we speak with consoling authority to a situation which we have never known?"<sup>10</sup> (4) *To purify us*. "It may be, alas, that there are different and far more humiliating causes for our bodily afflictions! The Lord may see in us that which grieves Him and provokes Him to use the rod. It can never be pointless to humble ourselves and institute self-examination, for even if we walk in our integrity and can lift up our face without shame in this matter concerning great sin, yet our shortcomings and omissions must cause us to blush. How much holier we ought to have been and might have been! How much more prevalently we might have prayed! With how much more unction we might have preached! Here is endless room for tender confession before the Lord."<sup>11</sup>

Towards the end of the first year of the Pastor's College, Spurgeon gave a lecture to his students entitled, *The Minister's Fainting Fits*. He began by saying, "fits of depression come over the most of us." "Usually cheerful as we may be, we must at intervals be cast down. The strong are not always vigorous, the wise not always ready, the brave not always courageous, and the joyous not always happy."<sup>12</sup> He then provided several reasons. "Is it not first that *they are men*? Being men, they are compassed with infirmity, and heirs of sorrow."<sup>13</sup> "Moreover, *most of us are in some way or other unsound physically*. Here and there we meet with an old man who could not remember that ever he was laid aside for a day; but the great mass of us labor under some form or other of infirmity, either in body or mind."<sup>14</sup> "Thirdly, *our work, when earnestly undertaken, lays us open to attacks in the direction of depression*. Who can bear the weight of souls without sometimes sinking to the dust? Passionate longings after men's conversion, if not fully satisfied (and when are they?), consume the soul with anxiety and disappointment.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Wyncoll, *The Suffering Letters of CH Spurgeon*, 13

<sup>8</sup> Hannah Wyncoll, *The Suffering Letters of CH Spurgeon*, 14

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Wyncoll, *The Suffering Letters of CH Spurgeon*, 14-15

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Wyncoll, *The Suffering Letters of CH Spurgeon*, 16

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Wyncoll, *The Suffering Letters of CH Spurgeon*, 17

<sup>12</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 167

<sup>13</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 168

<sup>14</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 168

To see the hopeful turn aside, the godly grow cold, professors abusing their privileges, and sinners waxing bolder in sin—are not these sights enough to crush us to the earth? All mental work tends to weary and to depress, for much study is a weariness of the flesh; but ours is more than mental work, it is heart work, the labor of our inmost soul."<sup>15</sup>

These infirmities may be no detriment to a man's career of special usefulness; they may even have been imposed upon him by divine wisdom as necessary qualifications for his peculiar course of service. Some plants owe their medicinal qualities to the marsh in which they grow; others to the shades in which alone they flourish. There are precious fruits put forth by the moon as well as by the sun. Pain has, probably, in some cases developed genius; hunting out the soul which otherwise might have slept like a lion in its den. Had it not been for the broken wing, some might have lost themselves in the clouds, some even of those choice doves who now bear the olive-branch in their mouths and show the way to the ark. But where in body and mind there are predisposing causes to lowness of spirit, it is no marvel if in dark moments the heart succumbs to them; the wonder in many cases is—and if inner lives could be written, men would see it so—how some ministers keep at their work at all, and still wear a smile upon their countenances. Grace has its triumphs still, and patience has its martyrs; martyrs none the less to be honored because the flames kindle about their spirits rather than their bodies, and their burning is unseen of human eyes. 'Blessed are they that mourn,' said the Man of Sorrows, and let none account them otherwise when their tears are salted with grace. We have the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels, and if there be a flaw in the vessel here and there, let none wonder.<sup>16</sup>

2. *Downgrade controversy*. "The Metropolitan Tabernacle was a member of the Baptist Union of England. As is normal in Baptist practice, the Union had no authority over the churches, and it served only as a means of fellowship, information, and missionary cooperation. But, as is not normal in Baptist practice, it had no doctrinal statement and required simply the belief that the immersion of the believer is the only Christian baptism. The presumption was that all such churches were thoroughly evangelical, and for years that had been almost entirely true" (Dallimore).<sup>17</sup> And yet, through the second half of the 1800s, Darwin's *Origin of Species*, Higher Criticism, Liberalism, and Arminianism, overtook many churches in England, and the Baptist Union was not immune. "They called their teaching the New Theology or New Thought and declared they were leading the people out of bondage and into liberty. By 1880 much of England was stirred by the change that was thus being made in Christian beliefs. Spurgeon's attitude toward this situation was immediately one of militant opposition" (Dallimore).<sup>18</sup> Ian Murray described the prevailing mindset of Spurgeon's day: "In many spheres of knowledge the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed spectacular advances: in science, philosophy, languages, and history there appeared to be a renaissance of learning and a new concern for accuracy and progress. In this effort to advance, traditional concepts were questioned, old sources were critically examined, and genuine progress was made. But if in all these spheres advances were possible, then why should man's spiritual knowledge be static? What gains might be made by Christianity if the Church was willing to adopt a less rigid and less uncritical attitude to the contents of Scripture. Indeed, was not a new approach to the interpretation of Scripture and a new definition of its inspiration essential if Christianity was not to lose touch with the onward march of science?"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 170

<sup>16</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 169

<sup>17</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 203

<sup>18</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 204-205

<sup>19</sup> Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, 139-140

When the Union refused to adopt a statement of faith at Spurgeon's request, he removed his membership in August 1887. That month, Spurgeon published an article entitled "The Down-Grade" in his magazine, and it opened with the statement: "No lover of the gospel can conceal from himself the fact that the days are evil...yet our solemn conviction is that things are much worse in many churches than they seem to be, and are rapidly tending downward."<sup>20</sup> Spurgeon's article appeared in the August 1887 issue of *The Sword and the Trowel*, and in the next three issues he published further articles. First came his 'Reply to Sundry Critics,' then 'The Case Proved,' and finally 'A Fragment on the Down-Grade Controversy.' In these he carried his case further, giving strong proof that he was not, as his opposers declared, merely spreading unfounded suspicions" (Dallimore).<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Spurgeon said, "From August 1887 to February 1892, scarcely any number of the magazine appeared without some reference to the Controversy and its various issues."<sup>22</sup> He wrote in September of 1887: "A chasm is opening between the men who believe their Bibles and the men who are prepared for an advance upon Scripture. 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. 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."<sup>23</sup>

In his 1888 lecture given at his annual Pastor's Conference, *The Evils of the Present Time, and our Object, Necessities, and Encouragements*, Spurgeon said: "It is not possible for us to converse together, during such a time of intense excitement, without alluding, or at least seeming to allude, to matters which are just now the subjects of severe controversy."<sup>24</sup> He then provided six evils "of the present time": (1) *The evil of questioning fundamental truth*. "Brethren have always differed on minor points, and it has not been unusual for us to meet each other and discuss matters of doctrine upon the basis of Holy Scripture. But another form of discussion has now arisen: men question the Scriptures themselves. To some, the teaching of Scripture is not of final authority: their inner consciousness, their culture, or some other unknown quantity, is their fixed point, if they have a fixed point anywhere. The fount of inspiration is not now within the Book, and with the Holy Spirit, but within the man's own intelligence. We have no longer, 'Thus saith the Lord;' but 'Thus saith modern thought.'"<sup>25</sup> (2) *The evil of attacking the truth by misrepresenting it, and wickedly distorting it*. "They designedly harp upon some one doctrine as though it were all we believed; or, at least, the chief point of our teaching. It is easy to paint all a man's features, and yet to caricature him by putting one feature out of proportion to the rest: this is what our opponents do. If they would state the case fairly, we should not mind it; but this would not serve their purpose. They make a straw man and carry him about as a guy, hoping afterwards to burn him. This is fine sport for children, but great folly in men."<sup>26</sup>

(3) *Another great evil is the want of decision for the truth among truly good men*. "Those who are our brethren in the faith of our Lord Jesus, but who do not seem to have made up their minds as to separation from error. Good, easy men, they are all for peace! 'Sitting on the fence' seems to be a popular position

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<sup>20</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 205-206

<sup>21</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 207

<sup>22</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 4:255

<sup>23</sup> Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, 143

<sup>24</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *An All-round Ministry*, 282

<sup>25</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *An All-round Ministry*, 285-287

<sup>26</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *An All-round Ministry*, 288

among professors just now."<sup>27</sup> (4) *Another great evil of the times is the insatiable craving for amusements.* "That men should have rest from labor, and that they should enjoy such amusements as refresh both body and mind, nobody wishes to deny. Within suitable bounds, recreation is necessary and profitable; but it never was the business of the Christian Church to supply the world with amusements."<sup>28</sup> (5) *Another of our difficulties lies in the lack of intense piety in many of the churches.* "Numbers of our brethren and sisters to-day are living, in a high degree, to the glory of God. But do you not notice how superficial is the religion of the mass of professors? How many servants might live in so-called Christian families without perceiving any difference between these houses and those of worldlings? In reference to ministers, many church-members are indifferent as to the personal piety of the preacher; what they want is talent or cleverness. What the man preaches does not matter now; he must draw a crowd and that is enough. Cleverness is the main thing."<sup>29</sup> (6) *A final evil is the indifference of the people outside with regard to the gospel.* "Compared with what it used to be, it is hard to win attention to the Word of God. I used to think that we had only to preach the gospel, and the people would throng to hear it. I fear I must correct my belief under this head. If the gospel does not attract men, nothing will; I mean, nothing which can do them good. I am saddened to know that some of my brethren, who faithfully preach the gospel of Christ, do not find the people flocking about them. We all feel that a hardening process is going on among the masses. In this vast city, we have street after street where the people are living utterly regardless of the worship of God."

Why is this? Whence this distaste for the ordinary services of the Sabbath? I believe that the answer, in some measure, lies in the direction little suspected. There has been a growing pandering to sensationalism; and, as this wretched appetite increases in fury the more it is gratified, it is at last found to be impossible to meet its demands. Those who have introduced all sorts of attractions into their services have themselves to blame if people forsake their more sober teachings, and demand more and more of the noisy and the singular. The most mischievous servant of Satan that I know of is the minister of the gospel, who not only doubts the truth in his own soul but propagates doubt in the minds of others by his criticisms, innuendoes, and triflings with words. Some ministers believe nothing except that nothing can be believed. Such a man's conscience is withered. In some modern ministers, the faculty wherewith to believe is extinct; they have played with words till they cannot be true if they try. Against this evil I have protested with my whole soul. People say, 'Why did you not speak against these things twenty-five years ago?' I answer, 'These evils were scarcely apparent then.' Things are not now as in our early ministry. The times are out of joint. The world may well be careless, for the Church in many places is full of unbelief. I trust the present hurricane of evil may soon pass over; but anyone who has his wits about him will sorrowfully admit that the good ship of the Church is now tossed about with contrary winds, and needs that her Lord should come, and say to the winds and the waves, 'Peace, be still.'<sup>30</sup>

Spurgeon's departure from the Union and his open comments resulted in a "public censure" by the Union in January 1888. Many longtime friends turned on him, and he was ridiculed by others as "outdated" and "contentious." This criticism was also found across the Atlantic. For example, a New York paper wrote: "Spurgeon's language regarding the Council of the Union is pervaded by extreme bitterness. Their expressions of kindness and brotherly love for him he terms the velvet pad covering the

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<sup>27</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *An All-round Ministry*, 290-292

<sup>28</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *An All-round Ministry*, 292-294

<sup>29</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *An All-round Ministry*, 294-295

<sup>30</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *An All-round Ministry*, 295-298

claw."<sup>31</sup> "There was difficulty even among the Pastor's College men. Over a hundred ministers trained at the College signed 'a mild protest' against Spurgeon's declaration and opposition to the Union" (Dallimore).<sup>32</sup> The Union meet in April 1888 to vote on a proposed Statement of Faith that Spurgeon rejected. "An attempt was made toward restoring harmony by the introduction of a resolution that it was thought would please both sides of the controversy. It could be regarded as evangelical in nature and yet could also be interpreted as not hostile to the New Theology" (Dallimore).<sup>33</sup> "On the face of it the document was evangelical. But Spurgeon, who was apparently allowed to see it in confidence before April, entirely distrusted it" (Murray).<sup>34</sup> Spurgeon rightly saw the document as a compromise. "Whatever the Council does, let it above all things avoid the use of language which could legitimately have two meanings contrary to each other. Let us be plain and outspoken. *There are grave differences* – let them be avowed honestly" (CHS).<sup>35</sup>

The Assembly met on April 23, 1888, and the declaration was accepted by 2,000 votes against 7. Murray provided a testimony of a man present on that day: "It was a strange scene. I viewed it almost with tears. I stood near a 'Spurgeon's man,' whom I knew very well. Mr. Spurgeon had welcomed him from a very lowly position. He went wild almost with delight at this censure of his great and generous master. I say it was a strange scene, that that vast assembly should be so outrageously delighted at the condemnation of the greatest, noblest, and grandest leader of their faith."<sup>36</sup> The burden of the controversy weakened Spurgeon's health. He confided to friends three months prior to his death: "The fight is killing me." "The controversy proved very hard on Spurgeon physically. He was sick before it began, and he had frequent attacks of gout while it went on. The experience proved more difficult for him because he did not like to fight. He was utterly unflinching in his stand for what he believed to be God's truth, but his affections for his fellowmen were very large, and it was with deep sorrow that he parted from many dear friends in the Union" (Dallimore).<sup>37</sup> Spurgeon wrote in a letter in October, 1888: "The pain I have felt in this conflict I would not wish any other man to share; but I would bear ten thousand times as much with eagerness, if I could see the faith once for all delivered to the saints placed in honor among the Baptist Churches of Great Britain. Weary and worn and ill—my motto is 'Faint, yet pursuing.' The inspiration of the Scriptures is the point assailed, and with it all true religion stands or falls. May you be kept from this dread tidal wave which is rolling over our country."<sup>38</sup>

3. *Death and legacy.* Spurgeon's health declined over the winter of 1890/91. When he returned from Mentone in January, he was very weak. "On June 7, 1891, Spurgeon stood before his people for the last time. That platform had been his pulpit throne from which he had proclaimed the Gospel to at least twenty million hearers, but now the great congregation was to hear his voice no more. For the following three months he was completely laid aside" (Dallimore).<sup>39</sup> In October, accompanied by his brother, his secretary, and Mrs. Spurgeon, he left for Mentone. "The final time he visited Mentone, God gratified his longing to have me with him; but, alas! 'I went out full, and the Lord brought me home again empty;' for, after enjoying three months of exceeding sweetness, I unexpectedly found that I had gone to Mentone to see my beloved die!"<sup>40</sup> Spurgeon died on the evening of Sunday, January 31, 1892, in Mentone France.

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<sup>31</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 218

<sup>32</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 213

<sup>33</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 210

<sup>34</sup> Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, 147

<sup>35</sup> Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, 147

<sup>36</sup> Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, 150

<sup>37</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 212

<sup>38</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 219

<sup>39</sup> Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 226

<sup>40</sup> C.H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, 4:338