

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

AN AMERICAN IN LONDON
HOW HENRY WARD BEECHER INFLUENCED THE DOWN GRADE CONTROVERSY

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Thesis

In the year 1860 in the Boston Unitarian magazine, the *Christian Examiner*, Henry Ward Beecher was praised as a leader of liberal thought.¹ Beecher who lived from 1813-1887 had been attempting to harmonize religion and science by appealing to emotional experience through his pulpit ministry and writing.² His influence in America was extensive. For instance, Beecher is considered as a leader in the “great shift from Calvinism to Liberal Protestantism” that happened in the Mid-Victorian era of America.³

Across the pond, C.H. Spurgeon was addressing similar issues that were leading up to the Down Grade Controversy that came to a head in 1887. Spurgeon remained stalwart in his faithfulness to the orthodoxy of the doctrines of the Bible, defended Calvinism, and was opposed to Darwinism. Beecher and Spurgeon both possessed tremendous influence as pastors, writers, and respected leaders.

This paper will explore the relationship of Beecher and Spurgeon while delineating the distinctions in their doctrine. This explanation will shed light on the compromises made by Beecher in areas of his theology, doctrine, and preaching. Similar concessions influenced the Down Grade Controversy in England. Most substantially, this paper will demonstrate that Beecher had a direct influence on the Down Grade Controversy. The paper will expose the connections that Beecher had to key figures in the Down Grade Controversy and three significant

¹ McLoughlin, William, G. *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher: An Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America, 1840-1870*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1970), 41.

² Ibid., 39.

³ Ibid., 6

ways he influenced the theology of Englanders in his relationships, through his preaching, and by his publicized writings.

Background of The Prince of Preachers

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) was born to John, a minister, and Eliza Jarvis Spurgeon of Essex England.⁴ Converted at the age of fifteen in 1849, Spurgeon embarked on an intentional journey with the Lord that was marked by a great character of determination and fortitude. As a teenager, Spurgeon began leading Bible studies and pastored at the Baptist church in Waterbeach in 1851. In April of 1854 he accepted the call to permanently pastor the congregation at New Park Street Chapel.⁵

Spurgeon had a deep commitment to theology. His theology for preaching began with a “commitment to the sole authority and infallible truthfulness of the Bible as the book of revealed truth.”⁶ He was also committed to the exposition of Scripture when he preached, and “warned against any violation of the historical grammatical sense of the text.”⁷ In his *Lectures to My Students*, he said, “The Bible is not a compilation of clever allegories or instructive poetical traditions; it teaches literal facts and reveals tremendous realities: let your full persuasion of this truth be manifest to all who attend your ministry.”⁸

⁴ Fullerton, W.Y. *Charles Spurgeon: A Biography*. (London, England: William and Norgate, 1920), 9-10.

⁵ Fullerton, W.Y. *Charles Spurgeon: A Biography*. 54.

⁶ Forrest, Benjamin, *A Legacy of Preaching, Volume Two*, 111.

⁷ Ibid., 115.

⁸ Spurgeon, C.H. *Lectures To My Students*, Vol. 1., (Albany, OR: Ages Library, 1998) 114.

Spurgeon was also committed to a view of Calvinism that strongly emphasized an evangelistic persuasion for the lost to come to Christ (which was unlike high-Calvinism of his era). In 1898 Spurgeon's wife published his *Autobiography* in four volumes, the first of which contained a tract written by Spurgeon (*The Defense of Calvinism*). In this tract Spurgeon wrote:

Every heresy, if brought to the touchstone, will discover itself here. I have my own Private opinion that there is no such thing as preaching Christ and Him crucified, unless we preach what nowadays is called Calvinism. It is a nickname to call it Calvinism; Calvinism is the gospel, and nothing else. I do not believe we can preach the gospel, if we do not preach justification by faith, without works; nor unless we preach the sovereignty of God in His dispensation of grace; nor unless we exalt the electing, unchangeable, eternal, immutable, conquering love of Jehovah; nor do I think we can preach the gospel, unless we base it upon the special and particular redemption of His elect and chosen people which Christ wrought out upon the cross; nor can I comprehend a gospel which lets saints fall away after they are called, and suffers the children of God to be burned in the fires of damnation after having once believed in Jesus.⁹

Tom Nettles noted that Spurgeon was willing to address controversy that impacted true religion and concluded, "he (Spurgeon) was after the glory of God in the defense of his truth."¹⁰ Though seeking out controversy was not his habit, Spurgeon possessed a willingness to identify doctrinal errors directly and boldly. Thus, having spent his ministry taking a stance against liberal tendencies that had impacted the Christian world, Spurgeon was finally confronted with a situation in the Baptist Union of which his church belonged. In 1887 Spurgeon allowed an article to be printed in *The Sword & the Trowel* that expressed the changes in the Baptist Union that came to be known as the Down Grade Controversy. By October of 1887 Spurgeon had withdrawn from the Baptist Union and by January of 1888 he was censured by the Union for his

⁹ Spurgeon, Mrs. C.H. *Autobiography Diary, Letters, and Records*, Vol. 1, 4 vols., (Albany, OR: Ages Library, 1998), 184-5.

¹⁰ Nettles, Tom J. *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, 472.

unwillingness to reveal individuals who were specifically guilty of the charges he had raised.¹¹

The central question was whether the Baptist Union would be comprised of men of every school of thought or only those who held to evangelical principles.

Background of The Most Famous Man in America

Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887) was the son of Lyman Beecher, a Presbyterian pastor, Yale graduate, and member of the New Divinity tradition.¹² Lyman was married to Roxana Foote who bore seven children before having Henry Ward. Several of Henry's siblings were famous in their own rights, Catharine Beecher influenced changes for women in education, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Charles was a minister and hymn writer, Thomas was a minister and educator, and Isabella Beecher Hooker was an activist in the American suffragist movement.¹³

Henry Ward Beecher attended Amherst College, where he began to struggle against the Calvinistic doctrines of his father as an uprising against Calvinistic orthodoxy was stirring within him. In 1834, Henry began attending Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, where in 1832 his father had become President. During this period, Henry continued to "revolt against" the Calvinistic orthodoxy of his father.¹⁴ After his ordination council, Beecher made a decisive and public move against Calvinism. Within Presbyterianism, lines between the Old School (conservatives) and New School (those willing to modify Calvinistic doctrines) were already

¹¹ Fullerton, W.Y. *Charles Spurgeon: A Biography*. 235.

¹² Forrest, Benjamin, *A Legacy of Preaching, Volume Two*, 195.

¹³ Applegate, Debby. *The Most Famous Man in America*, 12.

¹⁴ Forrest, Benjamin, *A Legacy of Preaching, Volume Two*, 195-6.

marked. The ordination council for Beecher predominantly existed of Old School men. Shockingly, Beecher unanimously passed his council and was ordained. However, there was a backlash. The Old School theologians insisted that anyone being licensed had to align with the Old School thought. “Beecher refused and proceeded to lead his small church out of the presbytery and into a New School body, which ordained him.”¹⁵ Beecher’s hostility towards Calvinism can be identified by his comments in a letter to Philip Schaff written in 1885. According to Schaff, Beecher described his theology as “evangelistic, progressive, and anti-Calvinistic.”¹⁶

Not only was Beecher guilty of denying Calvinistic orthodoxy but he also invested in several other academic and theological pursuits that led to further unorthodox beliefs. The first of these began with the study of phrenology, a study which “promised to demystify human behavior by breaking down the mind into approximately thirty different features, each one residing in a different “organ,” or section, of the brain.”¹⁷ Beecher proclaimed the following in his Yale Lecture on Preaching:

The importance of studying both sides of mental philosophy for the sake of religious education is one point; but when the question comes up of *how* to study mental philosophy, I do not know anything that can compare in facility of usability with phrenology . . . I know of no other nomenclature which so nearly expresses what we need, and which is so facile in its use, as phrenology.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Forrest, Benjamin, *A Legacy of Preaching, Volume Two*, 197.

¹⁶ Bok, Edward William. *Beecher Memorial: Contemporaneous Tributes to the Memory of Henry Ward Beecher*. (Priv. print. [De Vinne Press], 1887, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Beecher_Memorial/pXkEAAAAYAAJ?hl=en), 88.

¹⁷ Applegate, Debby. *The Most Famous Man in America*, 96.

¹⁸ Beecher, Henry Ward. *Yale Lectures on Preaching*. (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1872), 93-4.

Furthermore, Beecher was fascinated with evolution. In the summer of 1885 Beecher compiled a book of the eight sermons he had taught through the two previous years.¹⁹ These sermons demonstrate how “Beecher appropriates the concept of natural selection to bring coherence to his whole program of theological ideas.”²⁰ In the series Beecher addressed the impact of Evolution on important topics that define orthodoxy. He purported that “Evolution will . . . free the Sacred Scriptures from fictitious pretensions made by men.”²¹ Beecher also addressed the sinfulness of humanity when he taught from Romans 8. His view on sinfulness coupled with his views on evolution led him to conclude that the study of Romans 8 will be deeply profound based on “the understanding that men have advanced to a period in which the direction of the soul of God upon their souls has given them a victory over their animal nature.”²² Beecher understood humanity’s nature to be basically good, but originally and “subordinately an animal, with a superinduced spiritual being, an animal at the bottom and a spiritual being at the top.”²³

Lastly, it is important to note two final facts about Beecher. First, he was an abolitionist who preached very effectively against slavery. His influence also extended into political realms in the fight against slavery. Beecher was so greatly admired for these efforts that he was called on to preach the sermon at Fort Sumter at the end of the Civil War. Second, and of lamentable

¹⁹ Beecher, Henry Ward. *Evolution and Religion*. (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1885), 7.

²⁰ Benjamin T. Lynerd. “The Purpose-Driven Darwinist: Henry Ward Beecher and the Theology of Progress.” *Political Theology*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (January 2016), 49.

²¹ Beecher, Henry Ward. *Evolution and Religion*. 56.

²² *Ibid.*, 75.

²³ *Ibid.*

circumstances, Beecher was marred by accusations of misconduct with a woman (in actuality several women) in his congregation. The accusation made by Theodore Tilton was brought to court in January of 1875, a little over four years from the discovery of the adulterous relationships. Elizabeth Tilton contradicted her own testimony during the hearings, which left the jury hung and the case dismissed.²⁴

Setting the Stage for a Progressive Influence

Beecher's influence in America was indubitable. However, this paper will identify the relationship between Beecher, Spurgeon, and England. For Spurgeon, there originally existed a congenial perspective toward Beecher, as evidenced by Spurgeon's willingness to engage with, quote, or reference Beecher. For example, in 1860, From the Metropolitan Tabernacle pulpit Spurgeon had a fugitive slave, John Andrew Jackson, share his experience of slavery and escape. Spurgeon responded with a vehement attack on slavery that was recorded. Publishers in America responded by editing Spurgeon's works so sales would remain strong. However, this created unexpected implications. "Rumors began to circulate in the United States that Spurgeon had perhaps changed his thinking from what they had read earlier."²⁵ The rumors prompted Beecher to write Spurgeon with the demand to clarify and expose the truth of his beliefs. Spurgeon, having been unaware of the edits, wrote to several papers to clarify his convictions on slavery.²⁶

²⁴ Applegate describes in detail the events surrounding the discovery of the potential affair, details that led to the trial, and key events that occurred during the hearing. Applegate, Debby. *The Most Famous Man in America*, 391-455.

²⁵ Lewis A. Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publishers, 1992), 480.

²⁶ Ibid.

Another example of Spurgeon's good will toward Beecher is found in the sermon, "The Roaring Lion," no. 419, delivered on November 17, 1861, in which Spurgeon quotes an illustration of Beecher.²⁷

However, in 1864 Spurgeon preached a sermon on "Baptismal Regeneration," in which he critiqued the clergy of the Anglican Church. There was certainly backlash that occurred in England. Interestingly, "Even in the United States, Henry Ward Beecher got drawn into the affair and preached a critical sermon against Spurgeon."²⁸ Though good will had existed, there was a definite turning in the tone of the respect and cordial nature of the two preachers.

As a preeminent pastor, Spurgeon was always concerned about equipping his flock, his readers, and his students with pertinent resources for their maturation. For instance, he wrote in his first lecture to his students in *Commenting on Commentaries*, "Of course, you are not such wiseacres as to think or say that you can expound Scripture without assistance from the works of divines and learned men who have labored before you in the field of exposition."²⁹ He was encouraging the use of resources. However, Beecher was not overlooked in the warnings Spurgeon issued regarding some who might mislead Spurgeon's followers. In *The Sword & the*

²⁷ "I think I remember telling you of Mr. Beecher's illustration. When the negro went out with his master to catch wild ducks; one of the ducks being a little wounded, the master made the most desperate efforts to get that, but he observed that when it was dead, and had fallen down, he did not trouble much about it, because he could pick it up at any time. And so it is with dead souls; the devil can pick them up at any time. It is those that are wounded, but have got some little life, that he is afraid of losing. Such as these he is sure to pursue; he will be ever striving to get them safe in his grasp." Spurgeon, C.H. "The Roaring Lion." Sermon. Metropolitan Tabernacle, November 17, 1861. Sermons. Volume 7.

²⁸ Ibid., 490.

²⁹ Spurgeon, C.H. *Lectures To My Students*, Vol. 4. (Albany, OR: Ages Library, 1998) 10.

Trowel Spurgeon wrote the following review of *One Thousand Gems from Henry Ward Beecher*, “Who else among the living sons of men besides Mr. Beecher could furnish material for such a volume? He is for versatility of genius and wealth of illustration altogether peerless; our regret is, that he is far from being as spiritual as he is spirited and is more a model for an orator than for a divine.”³⁰

Nettles has suggested that “Spurgeon found *Bible Truth and Broad Church Error* much to his liking.”³¹ In this volume, originally published in 1873, William Ritchie addressed theological errors on inspiration, the incarnation, atonement, and justification, to name a few. Spurgeon said that the work contained “a concise and clear statement of each great Bible truth, and then an exposure of the whole departure from it in modern times.”³² Ritchie included several pages in one chapter that addressed the views of Beecher on the incarnation, which will be examined below. In Spurgeon’s review of the book in *The Sword & the Trowel*, he mentioned Beecher as an offender, and then Spurgeon warned his readers, “We would advise all those, and their name is legion, who have been captivated with the aberrations of these writers to give ear to the instructions of this book . . . an uplifted standard against a flood of error.”³³

It is important to consider what was happening “across the pond” with Beecher during this same period. Beecher had earlier gained vast influence and notoriety in America. He was writing and editing for *The Independent*, a Congregational newspaper. Unfortunately, Beecher

³⁰ “The Sword and the Trowel 1871,” The Spurgeon Library, The Spurgeon Center, 131.

³¹ Nettles, Tom J. *Living by Revealed Truth*, 454.

³² “The Sword and the Trowel 1874,” The Spurgeon Library, The Spurgeon Center, 237.

³³ Ibid.

was moving in progressive directions doctrinally. For instance, in 1850 the following was said about the Gospel by Beecher, “It has no intrinsic value as a system. Its’ end and value are in its power to stimulate the soul, to develop its faculties, to purify the emotions.”³⁴ At this point the naturalistic views of Beecher were beginning to show their shape and he was boldly sharing his views publicly.

In 1857-1858 a series of revivals broke out in New York under the influence of the Presbyterian pastor and Princeton graduate, J.W. Alexander. The awakening that happened under the influence of Alexander was evidence that the “cry against Calvinism . . . in terms of evangelistic effectiveness . . . and that evangelism was alien to its true ethos” was no longer to be held.³⁵ In other words, Calvinism was proving its strength and effectiveness in evangelism and revivalism. However, Beecher took exception and attempted to undermine Alexander in an article of *The Independent*, insisting that Alexander was changing his beliefs.³⁶ Beecher was

³⁴ Applegate, Debby. *The Most Famous Man in America*, 247.

³⁵ Murray, Iain Hamish. *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism; 1750 - 1858*. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 350.

³⁶ “But so evident was the evangelistic force of Alexander and his school in 1858 that those accustomed to caricature Calvinism were left to protest that he was changing his position. *The Independent*, a paper unfavourable to Old-School belief, drew attention to one of his sermons in which he said that everyone will be saved who ‘yields to the moving of the Spirit, takes God at His word, and makes the universal offer his own particular salvation’. Henry Ward Beecher claimed that such a statement represented the theology of ‘Taylor, the theology of New England, but it is not the theology of Princeton’.” 350-1. Murray critiqued Beecher when he said, “The point which Beecher and his fellow critics missed was that Alexander, and the Old-School generally, had been preaching this long before 1858, just as Whitefield and Davies had preached it in the previous century. And the word of Beecher quoted above continued to misconstrue the difference between Calvinism and Arminianism. Arminians held that the proclamation of grace is to be universal. Calvinists believed that no less strongly. But if Christ calls all men to himself, and if their coming is by faith, then, according to Arminianism, God must give grace to all men sufficient to enable that response. Calvinism asserted that the reason men do not respond lies in their sin but that God distinguishes between men who are equally undeserving by giving saving grace to those whom he has chosen.” Murray, Iain Hamish. *Revival and Revivalism: The Making*

likely struggling with his own effectiveness in the matter of revivalism. It is reported that members of the Plymouth Church pressed Beecher about starting a revival in their church. “To their surprise he flatly refused, saying he didn’t believe in “got-up” revivals.”³⁷ It was not long before Beecher had changed his mind, as there were reports of daily morning prayer times and revival meetings being held at Plymouth Church. Beecher’s reasons may have been based upon a response to the leading of God or from an “instinct for the popular mood.”³⁸

The matter of revivals was not isolated in America. These revivals bore consequences that impacted theological issues. Of notable impact “was the undermining of the Calvinism of the confessional standards.”³⁹ The problem did not center on the issue of Calvinism itself, but instead “the decline of Calvinism left a theological vacuum which was soon filled with myriad streams of theological ideas.”⁴⁰ Iaian Murray noted that it was “no coincidence that Arminianism advanced in Britain at the same time as revivalism.”⁴¹ In essence, revivalism emphasized the efforts of man in evangelicalism and the emphasis on the work of God began to be forgotten.⁴² These events, along with the byproduct of theological perspective and attitude, provided a ripe environment for the liberal teachings like Beecher’s to thrive and influence an audience.

and Marring of American Evangelicalism; 1750 - 1858. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994) 350-1.

³⁷ Applegate, Debby. *The Most Famous Man in America*, 297.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Tim Curnow, ed., *A Marvelous Ministry: How the All-Round Ministry of C.H. Spurgeon Speaks to Us Today* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1993), 112.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Iain Hamish Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, 412.

⁴² Ibid., 412-13.

Beecher is considered as “one of the earliest American fans of Herbert Spencer, the famed British social thinker who originated the term ‘survival of the fittest,’ and ‘the conception of gradual development.’”⁴³ In an effort to capture the philosophy and practical application of Beecher, William McLoughlin concluded that Beecher had accepted the “principle of evolution as early as 1860” having preached a sermon that year in which he said, “The world has come uphill every step from the day of Adam to this.”⁴⁴ Beginning in May of 1885, Beecher preached a series of eight sermons on “Evolution and Religion,” which he published later that year with the subtitle, *Discussing the Bearings of the Evolutionary Philosophy on the Fundamental Doctrines of Evangelical Christianity*. In his introductory message Beecher remarked:

Religious doctrines are not so rigorously preached as they used to be. A sermon on fore-ordination, election, decrees, reprobation would be a novelty in most congregations. And I venture to say that where they are yet preached it is done at times of exchange; the minister does not like to live in his own parish after he has preached a rousing sermon on those subjects.⁴⁵

He later said:

Now I count these various changes as mere symptoms of greater changes that have taken place and are taking place underneath. They are merely the efflorescence, on the skin, of that which is at work in the blood of theology. Are these changes and those from which they spring to be really feared by good men? Are we drifting into atheism? Are we drifting into absolute worldliness that shall supplant all moral and religious impulse and worship?

God is certainly advancing the Church and the world in upward directions. These special changes, I have said, are only part of a great development which is in progress; which springs from the very foundation of things: resulting from no single or special influence, from no particular men or philosophies; which hardly cares for help from human hands, and which cannot be hindered by human opposition. It is organic, universal, divine.⁴⁶

⁴³ Applegate, Debby. *The Most Famous Man in America*, 355.

⁴⁴ William McLoughlin G., *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher*, 49.

⁴⁵ Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution and Religion*, 11.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

Beecher communicated a deep appreciation for the development that evolution brought to religion, as he saw evolution as the natural and divine process that was responsible for the refinement of doctrine. Evolution provided an enlightenment that had done away with the comfort of preaching the doctrines of the Old-School theologians. His claim was that he had spent fifty years under the influence of the “doctrine of evolution.”⁴⁷ Though he may have understood it imperfectly in his early reflections, evolution became a lens by which Beecher viewed all other doctrines. The evidence is certain as the series addressed the influence on the “Inspiration of the Bible”, the “Sinfulness of Man,” the “New Birth,” and “Divine Providence and Design.” As early as 1859 Beecher had begun to teach his congregants that science had shown the flaws of Scriptures. He wrote in the *New Star Paper*, “There are many men who will trouble you with the dust of the Bible, its foundation knocked from under it, and the superstructure all taken down, but what you need is not curious speculation, but rich and pure living-deep-hearted piety, to build you up higher and higher in true manhood.”⁴⁸ Beecher had already become solidly compromised on his views of Scripture. McLoughlin summarized, “Yet, for all his efforts to conserve this central tenet of evangelicalism, Beecher had rejected far more than he retained. Not only had he repudiated the speculative aspects of Calvinistic doctrine, but the literal infallibility of the Bible as well.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution and Religion*, Preface.

⁴⁸ Henry Ward Beecher, *New Star Papers: Or, Views and Experiences of Religious Subjects*. (New York, NY: Derby & Jackson, 1859), 336-7.

⁴⁹ William McLoughlin G., *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher*, 79.

James B. Pond wrote an account of the 1876 trip to England that included himself, Beecher, and the Rev. T. DeWitt Talmage. The account chronicles the travels and messages of Beecher as he travelled through England, Scotland, and Ireland. The following gives the background to the lecture that will be highlighted below:

From Stockton-on-Tees we went to Gateshead (September 10th). This is really a part of Newcastle-on-Tyne, the two cities being separated by the river Tyne. Mr. Beecher had told me he should lecture on “Evolution” before leaving England; and as he was speaking in a group of towns in North England, the people had a desire to hear him on all possible subjects; so I took the liberty of announcing this subject.⁵⁰

Though initially Beecher was reluctant to speak on Evolution during his England tour, after a few days given to prepare, he did lecture on “Evolution and Religion.” In the lecture, Beecher first defined evolution based on the works of Spencer, rather than the Bible. Beecher then proceeded to describe how evolution was an “Aid to Christianity,” how it related to the personality of God, the designs of God in creation, prayer, sin, the church, and revivals. In this lecture, Beecher revealed his progressive theological thoughts and his beliefs that naturalism helps Christianity.⁵¹ Here are some key issues that Beecher taught:

Then, through countless ages, they ascended from fish to the reptilian, from the reptilian to the marsupial, from that to the bird, from that the to the quadrumanal, and from that to man.⁵²

The New Testament takes up where the Old Testament drops this ideal, and it is the endeavour of Christianity to give to men a development such as shall bring them up to all their capacity, and fill out the ideal of God in man. It is not theology, though it gave birth to it; it is not churchism, though it has since bred churches; it is not the science of ethics in a general way-it is the attempt of Christian religion to develop men, and to bring them

⁵⁰ James B. Pond, *A Summer In England with Henry Ward Beecher* (New York, NY: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, 1887), 72.

⁵¹ Ibid., 91ff..

⁵² Ibid., 94.

up to the highest unfolding of their spiritual nature, their social nature, as well as their physical nature.⁵³

The meaning of Beecher is clear: Christianity is the highest means for the evolutionary process of man to be improved. For Beecher, the purpose of Christianity does not focus on the glory of the grace of God extended through Christ, that requires a sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Note that Beecher mentions nothing about the importance of redemption, regeneration, justification, or repentance as being at the core of Christianity. His failure to include these elements is likely because of how he views the role of Christ as explained in the following statement.

Christ also taught the doctrine of the Divine immanence and intersphering, that God was with Him, in Him, and that He was near to men, and that He intermixed, as it were, His life and being with our lower life; and that it was by the inspiration of the Divine life that men were able to rise above animalism, and to come into relations with the invisible, with the spiritual, and with the eternal.⁵⁴

Though he does mention the important aspect of "relations," which point to the believer being in proximity to Christ, the concern is that the relation is grounded in humanity's "rise above animalism." The meaning is rooted in a strict evolutionary perspective that is based on naturalism at the core. The perspective on naturalism is proven by Beecher's explanation of the doctrine of sin that is not defined by Scripture, but instead according to the principles of naturalism. In the following statement, note the contrast Beecher made between science enlightening and the sense that Scripture provides an archaic view.

Science does not destroy the doctrine of human sinfulness; it explains it, it defines it, it throws a clearer light upon it. The old doctrine of sin, which it seems to me no man of moral feeling could allow himself to stand on for an hour or a moment, was that the human race born of their progenitors fell with them, and that the curse of God rested upon the whole human posterity, and that therefore all men by reason of their connection

⁵³ James B. Pond, *A Summer In England with Henry Ward Beecher*, 96.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

with Adam are born without original righteousness, without true holiness and without communion with God.

But admit for the moment that man was primarily an animal, born and developed from his congeners into a higher state; that there was superinduced upon him a moral element, a spiritual element, a rational element. The animal man was first in order, and too often in strength, in the primitive day, in the early day of every man. And sin lies in conflict between the upper and the under man. If you want to see the doctrine stated in its most cogent form, read the 7th chapter of Romans, where the conflict is not between a man before he is converted, and after his is converted, but between the man animal and the man moral and spiritual . . . Sin is the remainder, as it were, of the conflict between man moral and spiritual and man animal and so far degraded.⁵⁵

Beecher had become solidly compromised on his views of the inerrancy of Scripture. In his sermon, the “Inspiration of Scripture,” in 1872, Beecher said, “It [the Bible] contains the *germs* of all moral truth. But human life quickens the germs and carries out those truths into forms and applications which the original did not portend.”⁵⁶ In other words, as Beecher had said in his introduction, “The real value of the Bible is in that which it does . . . if it has in it the means of making men thoroughly furnished into every good work, then it is of transcendent importance.”⁵⁷ Beecher did not focus on the true meaning of inspiration in the sermon; rather, his focus was on the end which it accomplished.

Now, to examine the warning about Beecher from the aforementioned book by Ritchie, *Bible Truth and Broad Church Error*.⁵⁸ Ritchie commented, “I venture . . . to observe, that

⁵⁵ James B. Pond, *A Summer In England with Henry Ward Beecher*, 180-9.

⁵⁶ Henry Ward Beecher, *The Original Plymouth Pulpit: The Sermons of Henry Ward Beecher, in Plymouth Church, Brooklyn*, ME, vol. VII (Boston, ME: Chicago, IL: The Pilgrim Press, 1871), 252.

⁵⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, *The Original Plymouth Pulpit*, 249.

⁵⁸ Lewis A. Drummond in his work, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* mentions the term, “Broad Church,” refers to a wing of the Established Church of England, which meant that a majority of English people were drifting toward a state of non-religion. 663. Surgeon writes, “‘Broad Church’ is here used not in opposition to High Church, but to clear and definite views of

nothing like his [Beecher's] teaching on this whole subject, is found in the word of God."⁵⁹

Ritchie was referring to *The Life of Jesus, The Christ*, a novel biography written by Beecher and published in 1872. Beecher believed that the Divine nature of Jesus had been "brought into the human body, and was subject to all its laws and conditions. No one can extract from this the notion of two intermixed souls in one nature."⁶⁰ This unorthodox understanding prompted Ritchie to include the teaching of Beecher in his work. Beecher went even further in his unorthodox conclusions. The following statement by Beecher challenges the historical view about Jesus possessing both divine and human natures and warranted Ritchie's critique:

If God became a true man, they argued, he must have had a human soul. As if the Divine nature clothed in flesh did not constitute the most absolute manhood and fill up the whole ideal!

Man's nature and God's nature do not differ in kind, but in degree of the same attributes. A human soul is not something other and different from the Divine soul. It is as like it as the son is like his father. God is father, man is son.⁶¹

The publishing of Ritchie's book in London must have been important and helpful for Spurgeon and his congregants in England, as well as Spurgeon's worldwide readers.⁶² The

gospel truth." "The Sword and the Trowel 1874," The Spurgeon Library, The Spurgeon Center, 237.

⁵⁹ Ritchie, William, D.D., *Bible Truth and Broad Church Error* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1873), 75.

⁶⁰ Henry Ward Beecher, *The Life of Jesus, the Christ, CIHM/ICMH Microfiche Series = CIHM/ICMH Collection de Microfiches; No. 28086* (Toronto: J. Campbell, 1872), 49.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Spurgeon writes the following in the review of *BT&BCE*, "This book is an uplifted standard against a flood of error; we rejoice that the author has been enabled to set it up by the help of the good Spirit of God. Those especially who are troubled with doubts upon the eternity of future punishment, will here find such plain teaching of Scripture upon the subject as leaves nothing further to be desired." "The Sword and the Trowel 1874," The Spurgeon Library, The Spurgeon Center, 237.

comment further solidifies the connection, potential impact, and impending danger of the unorthodox teaching that Beecher expounded in both America and in England.

The Down Grade Controversy

Recognizing that matters of doctrinal importance do not happen in a vacuum, nor do they, when they have had some level of importance, fail to bear future consequences, the members of the Baptist Union who participated in the Down Grade Controversy were impacted by outside sources. Much of England was watching the Down Grade Controversy. Many who were outside of England were also being impacted by the Down Grade Controversy. For instance, students of Spurgeon College, who were serving as far away as Australia, were writing letters of encouragement to their mentor and professor. One would be naïve to think that the significance of the matters leading up to the Down Grade Controversy were isolated events pertaining only to the Baptist Union of England. Thus, it is also reasonable to conclude that Beecher and others played an influential role in the issues surrounding the Down Grade Controversy.

In March 1887 Spurgeon published an article in *The Sword & the Trowel*. The article, written by Robert Shindler, captures the essential elements that led to the Down Grade Controversy that was occurring in the Baptist Union in 1887.⁶³ The article presented a short history of the Church of England, explaining how the enforcement of the Act of Unity of 1662 required the expulsion of Puritanism from England and Wales. Shindler also identified that the churches which were established as the result of the expulsion of the ministers were largely

⁶³ Spurgeon, C.H., *The Down Grade Controversy*, (Albany, OR: Ages Library, 1998), 6.

Calvinistic. He went on to explain that within two or three generations many of those churches adopted Arian or Socinian views.⁶⁴

Shindler also noted that many of the ministers became “more speculative in the matter of their discourses and dwelt more on the moral teachings of the New Testament.”⁶⁵ For Shindler, and Spurgeon by agreement (included in a footnote comment), the focus on moral teaching was an issue that compromised the truth of the gospel. Unfortunately, the evaluation of the decline in conviction grew bleaker as Shindler noted that “Natural theology frequently took the place which the great truths of the gospel ought to have held, and the sermons became more and more Christless.”⁶⁶ In short, Shindler and Spurgeon saw the contributing factors to the Down Grade Controversy as a move from the Calvinism of the Puritans to a compromised gospel that was focused on natural theology and morality more than the “vital truths of the gospel, [which consist of] ruin by sin, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and redemption by the blood of Christ.”⁶⁷

Dr. Lewis Drummond wrote, “One significant factor in setting the stage for the Down Grade Controversy was Darwin’s publication of *The Origin of the Species*.”⁶⁸ Drummond also identified that “evolutionary theory” impacted the Victorian worldview that “resulted in a humanistic approach to all reality.”⁶⁹ Beecher acknowledged that he had been influenced by Spencer and was therefore well on his way to a humanistic or naturalistic approach to reality by

⁶⁴ Spurgeon, C.H., *The Down Grade Controversy*, (Albany, OR: Ages Library, 1998), 6.

⁶⁵ Henry Ward Beecher, *The Life of Jesus, the Christ*, 53.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁸ Lewis A. Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 661.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

the time that Darwin's work arrived. Both works enabled him to confidently expound his unorthodox positions. Note several other areas that Drummond attributes as factors to the Down Grade: the deity of Christ, the miraculous, the supernatural, and the discreditation of the authenticity of Scripture.⁷⁰

For Spurgeon the lines had been drawn because of his convictions about doctrinal orthodoxy, especially that of the person of Christ. "He said the Church of England was "eaten through with overt Unitarianism.""⁷¹ Though the connection is not concrete between Beecher and British Unitarians, the Unitarians of America had been champions of the Beecher's theology for decades.⁷² One may conclude that Spurgeon considered Beecher to be solidly in their camp.

What did Spurgeon consider as the factors that led to the Down Grade Controversy? The following summary by Spurgeon provides a brief explanation of his personal conclusion about those contributing factors:

These who turned from Calvinism may not have dreamed of denying the proper deity of the Son of God, renouncing faith in his atoning death and justifying righteousness, and denouncing the doctrine of human depravity, the need of Divine renewal, and the necessity for the Holy Spirit's gracious work, in order that men might become new creatures; but, dreaming or not dreaming, this result became a reality.⁷³

⁷⁰ Lewis A. Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 663.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 668.

⁷² Beecher's book *Norwood* was a bestseller in 1868 and continued to be published until 1887. These decades mark a different level of influence as seen and heralded by Unitarians in America. "Henry Ward Beecher's contribution to American religious development was to effect a workable marriage between the romantic, idealistic, individualistic aspects of transcendental philosophy and the conservative, well-ordered institutional aspects of Christianity." Note the comment in the Boston Review found in footnote 85. William McLoughlin G., *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher*, 64, 68.

⁷³ Spurgeon, C.H., *The Down Grade Controversy*, 9.

In the 1887 October edition of *The Sword & the Trowel*, Spurgeon wrote the article, “The Case Probed.” In the article he outlined a series of indictments he believed contributed to the Down Grade that were included in an earlier article published by the Evangelical Alliance. Spurgeon mentioned the following areas: the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus, the future destiny of the sinner, and the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures.⁷⁴ Spurgeon also referred to allegations made by the President of the Gloucestershire and Herefordshire Association of Baptist Churches. The allegations included the following compromised areas: Calvary was robbed of its glory, sin had lost its horror, mankind was evolving into sentimentality that produced emotionalism, and evolution was weakening the Gospel.⁷⁵ In a statement that echoes the concerns of the aforementioned allegations, Spurgeon warned his readers, “If we do not believe in Universalism, or in Purgatory, and if we do believe in the inspiration of Scripture, the Fall, and the great sacrifice of Christ for sin, it behooves us to see that we do not become accomplices with those who teach another gospel, and as it would seem from one writer, have avowedly another God.”⁷⁶ In other words, Spurgeon was encouraging his readers, especially those who were orthodox, to resist accommodating and compromising with those who believed in universalism and other errors, for compromise led to belief in a false gospel and a false god.

These kinds of errors were most important in the matter of evangelism. When reading Spurgeon’s sermons, it is evident that the doctrines of grace provide a framework for his convictions and habits of calling men to repentance and faith in Christ as the only means for salvation. The opposite was true of Beecher who said:

⁷⁴ Spurgeon, C.H., *The Down Grade Controversy*, 36.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 37

⁷⁶ Ibid., 39

We are saved, not by what we are, but by what we hope to be. We are saved, not by the purity of our spirit, but by the hope that, striving upward and onward, we shall reach a state where the spirit shall not be unworthy of God.

Undoubtedly, Beecher was presenting a gospel that was different than the gospel that Spurgeon preached. Thus, Spurgeon was justified in his unwavering attempt to call the Baptist Union back to orthodoxy. The Down Grade could no longer be avoided, the grade of the slope had changed and the impact and momentum had moved many of Spurgeon's fellow pastors into a dangerous direction.

During the Down Grade Controversy conflict arose between Joseph Parker and Spurgeon. Parker was a mutual friend of Beecher and Spurgeon and was a familiar London Congregational pastor who even attended Spurgeon's 50th birthday. As the Down Grade Controversy was sparking, Parker took advantage of the controversy surrounding Spurgeon and attempted to mar the stance of Spurgeon on orthodoxy.⁷⁷ This was likely a response to the regular reviews that Spurgeon gave of Parker's works which included concerns regarding Parker's theology.⁷⁸ The relationship between Spurgeon and Parker existed in polarities and likely exhibited the same issues Spurgeon had with Beecher. Note the following record:

It was around this period [1887] that he [Spurgeon's son, Thomas] realized that his father had taken an unpopular theological stand in London which had brought him under much criticism. C.H. Spurgeon gently refused to identify the evangelical faith with the rather watered-down version being offered by Henry Ward Beecher.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Lewis A. Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers*, 599.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 567.

⁷⁹ Skinner, Craig, *Lamplighter and Son* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1984), 91.

Thomas Spurgeon understood the implications well, for C.H. Spurgeon had written a letter to Parker on March 2, 1887, (just six days before Beecher's death) in which he said, "The evangelical faith in which you and Mr. Beecher agree is not the faith which I hold."⁸⁰

The Down Grade Controversy was marked by one prominent character, John Clifford, who became the outspoken opponent of Spurgeon. It was Clifford who set the tone of theological ambiguity for the Baptist Union during the Down Grade Controversy. The vague wording used of theological convictions was one of the greatest frustrations for Spurgeon. Clifford did well to maintain a facade of orthodoxy until he published "*The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*," after the death of Spurgeon. Nettles commented that "Clifford's forthrightness certainly vindicated Spurgeon, for Clifford affirmed in ambiguous terms that he definitely rejected the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture."⁸¹

The significance of Clifford's relationship to Spurgeon in the Down Grade Controversy bridges the connection of Beecher and Parker to Spurgeon because Clifford, Parker, and Beecher were known to be friends. In 1904 Charles T. Bateman wrote a biography on John Clifford in which he remarked, "When Henry Ward Beecher was over here Dr. Clifford saw much of him."⁸² Bateman identified the depth of the relationship when he included Clifford's description of Beecher:

His power was enormous in the life of the people of the States-greater than that of any man who has wrought in the life of this century, unless we except Lincoln, and it was power exerted on their intellectual and social life in all its departments and divisions. He

⁸⁰ Fullerton, W.Y., *Charles Spurgeon: A Biography*, 226.

⁸¹ Nettles, Tom J., *Living by Revealed Truth*, 572.

⁸² Bateman, Charles Thomas. *John Clifford: Free Church Leader and Preacher*. (London: National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches, 1904), 277.

was the . . . Moses of the New Theology . . . His was a steep climb . . . but he dared the road and wrought out his life-task with a pure independence and a sublime faith.”⁸³

It is no coincidence that Clifford held Beecher in high esteem on the very same issues that were alarming to Spurgeon in the Down Grade Controversy. Though not a direct opponent in the Down Grade Controversy, the influence of Beecher is undeniable. The far-reaching influences of his writings, lectures, and friendships clearly correspond to the topics at the center of the Down Grade Controversy.

Conclusion

Spurgeon was unique in many ways, but in one way he demonstrated a strength of character that was unrivaled. Spurgeon possessed a great desire to maintain unity despite differences “when these differences concerned matters that did not attack the doctrines of Scripture, God, Christ, or salvation.”⁸⁴ However, when Spurgeon thought those central areas were being compromised, he would often not avoid controversy any longer. Instead, Spurgeon would readily engage opponents in defense of the afore-mentioned, central and orthodox doctrines of the faith. He would confront the issues and their proponents boldly and directly.

The events had aligned and most of the factors that led to the Down Grade Controversy clearly existed in the theology of Beecher. There ought to be little doubt that the theological issues of the day led to this climactic moment for Spurgeon. Orthodoxy was in jeopardy and Spurgeon was keen to defend the faith.

Beecher, as a Congregationalist pastor, who had been championed by the Universalists, is certain to have played a significant role in the promotion of theological errors. His vast influence

⁸³ Bateman, Charles Thomas. *John Clifford*, 277.

⁸⁴ Nettles, Tom J., *Living by Revealed Truth*, 474.

in America was certainly felt as far as England. Unfortunately, the influence of Beecher in England was not only felt from a distance. His travels to England and teaching in the pulpits of British churches solidified his theological impact.

In America, the *Boston Review* was established largely to refute the progressive ideas of men like Beecher. In one article the following summary is given after the writer reviewed several of Beecher's sermons on key doctrines.

The sermons which we have selected are such as supply the best specimens of the theology of Plymouth Pulpit; in other words, we have taken such as present the preacher in nearest proximity to the fundamental truths of Christianity. The result may be briefly stated. While he plays about those truths continually, and sometimes appears on the inevitable path to them, he never preaches them in their scriptural clearness and fulness; on the contrary, he either eschews them altogether, or fatally subverts in seeming to assert them, or boldly and bitterly assaults them with all the force of his rhetoric.⁸⁵

In England, though Ritchie did seek to warn his readers about the errors of Beecher's theology, on several different accounts Spurgeon took up the mantle to critique and warn of Beecher's theology. This paper first sought to show the connection of Beecher and Spurgeon. The connection is clear and relevant.

There are strengths that could be added to the thesis. First, discovering and examining the letters between the two may have proven more beneficial in understanding the true nature of their relationship. Unfortunately, these are not available in the Spurgeon Library and could not be located by the limits of this researcher. Second, there is also further research that might be done to discover how other pastors in the Baptist Union related to Beecher. No matter, the evidence remains that Beecher and Spurgeon were engaged on these matters of orthodoxy from different positions. Most importantly, the way in which Spurgeon related to Beecher

⁸⁵ *The Boston Review: Devoted to Theology and Literature*, Vol. I. (Boston, MA: John M. Whittemore and Company, 1861), 133.

demonstrates the validity of the thesis: Beecher had direct influence in the areas of theology that led to the Down Grade Controversy.

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