

# Spurgeon the Warrior

*"Contend for the faith once for all delivered" (Jude 3).*

They asked me to do a biographical seminar on Charles Spurgeon, but didn't give me any parameters, so I'm going to call this "Spurgeon the Warrior," and I want to explore the background of how Spurgeon first became embroiled in controversy. And try to see why he was such an effective soldier of the truth.

I did a biography of Spurgeon's early life in the 2002 Shepherds' Conference. We surveyed the various influences that shaped him from his birth to age 19. That's when he was called to be pastor of the London congregation he would pastor for the rest of his life. That seminar was recorded, and you'll find it in the media vault at the Shepherds' Conference website. Just search for "Spurgeon" and it comes up.

Today I want to take up about where we left off eight years ago. We'll begin with Spurgeon's early ministry in London, paying special attention to the controversies that assaulted him in his early years there.

Spurgeon was not a willing controversialist. He wasn't the type of personality that relished disputes or took pleasure in nonstop combat. He despised conflict. And yet he was embroiled in one kind of conflict or another for most of his ministry.

If your knowledge of Spurgeon is only superficial, you might not realize that about him. Today it sometimes seems like Spurgeon is universally beloved. He is quoted and admired by Arminians and Calvinists alike. He is claimed by both charismatics and non-charismatics. He is the closest thing Baptists have to a patron saint—and it doesn't matter what flavor of Baptists you're talking about; practically everyone from the strictest hyper-

fundamentalist groups to so-called moderate Baptists who are willing to compromise just about anything; Arminians and pragmatists alike, including some of the most worldly and seeker-sensitive types—Baptists *all* say they love Spurgeon. And not just Baptists. One of the most interesting books about Spurgeon was written by Helmut Thielicke, the famous German Lutheran neo-orthodox theologian.

Thielicke's book is called *Encounter with Spurgeon*, and some of it is quite good, especially if you bear in mind that Thielicke is German, Lutheran, and neo-orthodox, and he writes from that perspective. In fact, listen to Helmut Thielicke from a totally different context.

In his book *The Evangelical Faith*, Thielicke said, "To do theology is to actualize Christian truth . . . to understand it afresh. . . . [Theology] has nothing to do with timeless truth. That's a more or less typical neo-orthodox perspective. Thielicke said *doing* theology is about "actualizing" Christianity; it's not about affirming or making sense of truth in any propositional form. *Doing* theology is about understanding religion afresh, recontextualizing faith in a new way for every generation. Notice that Thielicke expressly says, "It has nothing to do with timeless truth." Those are his very words.

And yet Thielicke admired Spurgeon for "doing theology" precisely the way Thielicke said theology is not supposed to be done. Listen to the opening paragraphs of Thielicke's *Encounter with Spurgeon*. He writes,

In the midst of the theologically discredited nineteenth century there was a preacher who had at least six thousand people in his congregation every Sunday, whose sermons for many years were cabled to

New York every Monday and reprinted in the leading newspapers of the country, and who occupied the same pulpit for almost forty years without any diminishment in the flowing abundance of his preaching and without ever repeating himself or preaching himself dry. The fire he thus kindled, and turned into a beacon that shone across the seas and down through the generations, was no mere brush fire of sensationalism, but an inexhaustible blaze that glowed and burned on solid hearths and was fed by the wells of the eternal Word. Here was the miracle of a bush that burned with fire and yet was not consumed.

In no way was he like the managers of a modern evangelistic campaign, who manipulate souls with all the techniques of mass-suggestion, acting like salvation engineers. Charles Haddon Spurgeon . . . was still unaware of the wiles of propaganda. . . . He worked only through the power of the Word which created its own hearers and changed souls.

Now this was not *his* word, the product of his own rhetorical skills. It was rather a word which he himself had "merely" heard. He put himself at its disposal, as a mere echo . . . His message never ran dry because he was never anything but a recipient. Thielicke goes on to say, "It would be well for a time like ours to learn from this man." Thielicke himself might have been a more reliable and more edifying professor of theology if he had taken his own counsel to heart and learned at Spurgeon's feet how to deal with the word of God and how to do theology.

But my point here is one I am sure you have heard before: Almost everyone today wants to claim Spurgeon. Twentieth century historians and biographers turned

Spurgeon into a big, lovable Teddy-bear who is perfectly safe, always devotional, doctrinally nondescript, and ecumenically broad. In reality, Spurgeon was none of those things. He was a convinced, doctrinaire Calvinist. He was an outspoken critic of everything novel or superficial in theology. He was often despised and ridiculed as a hopelessly narrow doctrinal dinosaur. He was engaged in one controversy or another for practically his whole ministry. And in the face of modernism and broad-church ecumenism, he became a rigorous separatist.

In short, Spurgeon embodied everything neo-orthodoxy rejects about historic *evangelical* orthodoxy; he was the living emblem of everything today's stylish evangelicals despise about historic fundamentalism; He was a strong, vocal defender of practically every doctrine postmodernist and Emergent Christians have ever tried to challenge; and he firmly believed the offense of the cross ought to be declared openly and paraded in public—not downplayed for the sake of people who might be offended by the truth of the gospel.

He was commonly criticized for being behind the times in his own era. In a generation enthralled with modern ideas and the scientific method, Spurgeon stubbornly clung to the doctrine of the Puritans. In those Victorian years when Dickens' novels were popular best-sellers, he preferred reading nonfiction from the church fathers. In a day when the most popular attractions on the London stage were first-run productions of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas (which are all totally G-rated material by today's standards), Spurgeon decried the theater as trivial and worldly—and no place for serious Christians. He absolutely hated superficial, stylish, worldly religion.

A few years ago *The Banner of Truth* published an article I have kept linked on the front page of The Spurgeon Archive ever since. It's titled, "Are You *Sure* You Like Spurgeon?"—by Alan Maben. Maben points out that Spurgeon's doctrinal stance set him firmly against virtually every idea that makes contemporary American evangelicalism distinctive. Practically every fashionable religious trend or new perspective you'll ever see touted as wonderful and revolutionary in the pages of *Christianity Today* is an idea Spurgeon would have steadfastly opposed. Many of them are ideas he *did* oppose when the modernists proposed them. Now that they have been re-labeled *post-modern*, I'm confident Spurgeon would oppose them just the same.

My goal in this hour is to give you a little glimpse of the real Spurgeon—true and unvarnished. Although he was criticized as outdated and derided as a theological fossil in his own time, Spurgeon still speaks to our age. Ironically, those who were perceived as so stylish and forward-looking in Spurgeon's era are the ones who are outmoded and mostly forgotten today. We barely remember only a few of them—Joseph Parker, for example, who savagely criticized Spurgeon even at Spurgeon's death because he thought Spurgeon was old-fashioned and too contentious about doctrine. Parker studiously kept up with Victorian fashions. He scandalized Spurgeon by hanging out with London's theater crowd and boasting about his familiarity with worldly things. *Parker's People's Bible* is still available in second-hand bookshops, but no one reads it any more, and it's too much a product of its own time to be very useful today. The tables have turned. It is Parker who sounds quaint and old-fashioned. Spurgeon speaks as powerfully as ever. All of Spurgeon's works are still in

print and still influential. Even the battles Spurgeon fought are still relevant to us. Practically all of his controversial writings are as timely now as the day they were written—which suggests that Spurgeon chose his fights well.

For the past five years I have been posting excerpts from Spurgeon sermons to illustrate what I am talking about here. It is possible to give a fairly thorough answer to Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, and other contemporary neo-liberals with nothing but quotations from Spurgeon's published works. And each weekend for the past five years I have been posting excerpts from Spurgeon that prove the point. (If you want to read a sampling of those, do a Google search for "weekly dose of Spurgeon.")

Consider, for example, the recent attacks on substitutionary atonement and the idea of penal satisfaction. Among postmodern evangelicals today there is a widespread distaste for the idea that God *punished* Christ for the sins of believers. Why would a loving God do that? Why could not God simply forgive, without exacting some kind of blood atonement? The principle of propitiation makes God sound vindictive and harsh. Who needs that?

A few years ago, Steve Chalk, a well-known evangelical leader and media figure in England wrote a book in which he compared the idea of penal substitution to "divine child abuse." N. T. Wright endorsed that book, and in America, Brian McLaren echoed the line about child abuse in one of his books. Suddenly, substitutionary atonement was on the table for discussion, and sadly, most Christian leaders in our generation were unprepared to defend the doctrine. The idea hadn't been explicit in evangelical teaching for decades, and lots of young evangelicals seemed prepared to do away with it.

Rob Bell staged a road show with a big altar as a prop and went around the country attacking the idea that Christ's sacrifice had anything to do with satisfying God's wrath against sin.

Turns out Spurgeon had quite a lot to say about that in his day, because the modernists of the Victorian era were just as keen to sanitize the gospel and do away with the doctrine of atonement as postmodernists today are.

Listen to what Spurgeon had to say about the issue. He said:

I will not foul my mouth with the unworthy phrases which have been used in reference to the substitutionary work of our Lord Jesus Christ; but it is a sore grief of heart to note how these evil things are tolerated by men whom we respect.

. . . I would like to rise from my bed, during the last five minutes of my life, to bear witness to the Divine sacrifice and the sin-atonement blood. I would then repeat those words which speak the truth of substitution most positively, even should I shock my hearers; for how could I regret that, as in Heaven my first words would be to ascribe my salvation to my Master's blood, my last act on earth was to shock His enemies by a testimony to the same fact?

Spurgeon believed clarity and biblical accuracy were far more important in the proclamation of truth than the question of whether someone might be offended by the truth or not. Besides, he was convinced that the whole essence of the gospel was contained in the doctrine of the atonement. So he spelled it out plainly. He said:

The doctrine of Holy Scripture is this, that inasmuch as man could not keep God's law, having fallen in Adam, Christ came and fulfilled the law on the behalf of his people; and that inasmuch as man had already

broken the divine law and incurred the penalty of the wrath of God, Christ came and suffered in the room, place, and stead of his elect ones, that so by his enduring the full vials of wrath, they might be emptied out and not a drop might ever fall upon the heads of his blood-bought people.

You'll find as you read the works of Spurgeon that certain key points of controversy run all the way through his ministry from start to finish. He often described himself as battle-weary, but he never backed away from the fight, and indeed Spurgeon himself and most of his biographers have believed that the stress of controversy hastened Spurgeon's death. The Down-Grade Controversy which consumed the final five years of Spurgeon's life, was a particular stress.

But neither the pain of stress nor the reality of controversy was anything new to Spurgeon when the Down-Grade Controversy broke out in 1887. This was merely one final recapitulation of the pounding theme that reverberated through Spurgeon's life from the time he began his ministry in London until the day he died.

And I think we can learn a lot from studying Spurgeon's battles and observing how faithfully and fiercely he fought—seldom for his own reputation or stature—but always for the truth and the honor of God.

As I said, Spurgeon was a reluctant controversialist. I don't think he had any expectation that wave after wave of controversy that would assault him from the time he first accepted the call to the New Park Street chapel.

That was London's best-known, largest, and most prestigious pulpit, having been occupied for 51 years a century before Spurgeon by John Gill, perhaps the

greatest Baptist theologian ever. A generation before Gill, Benjamin Keach had pastored the church for 36 years. Keach had helped draft the famous 1689 Baptist Confession, which is still the document by which all other Baptist confessions are measure. Keach had also written a Baptist catechism in an era when the Church of England aggressively persecuted dissenters. Keach was put in the pillory more than once and tried for his beliefs, and his books had been burned. But he was one of the great pioneer Baptists.

John Rippon had pastored the church for 63 years, starting a generation after Gill until a generation before Spurgeon. Rippon wrote the first significant Baptist hymnal—and we still sing some of his hymns. ("How Firm a Foundation" came into the church through Rippon's hymnal. Check your hymnbook where it lists the hymn writers. "How Firm a Foundation" is credited to "K" in Rippon's Selection).

So this was a historic church, and it was already ancient by evangelical standards when Spurgeon came to London. By then, people had forgotten that John Rippon was only 20 when he became senior pastor in 1773. A lot of people feared that Spurgeon was far too young when he took the mantle of Benjamin Keach, John Gill, and John Rippon. He was only 19 and he had been a Christian for less than a year.

But Spurgeon was already an amazingly gifted preacher, and both fame and infamy immediately overwhelmed him. Crowds of appreciative listeners came everywhere he spoke—so much that the New Park Street Chapel (which seated about 1200 people) simply could not hold the crowds. In February of 1855, when Spurgeon had been pastor for less than a year, Sunday morning services were moved to Exeter Hall, a famous evangelical

auditorium in the Strand. (The strand is that elegant street in Central London that runs parallel to the river from Trafalgar Square to Fleet Street. If you're familiar with London today, Exeter Hall stood on the site that's occupied today by the Strand Palace Hotel, right across the street from the entrance to the Savoy Hotel.)

Exeter Hall had a large, ostentatious auditorium. I don't think Spurgeon himself was particularly fond of it. It was an old place with notorious acoustical problems. But it was the best venue in central London for Spurgeon's ministry. It was easily accessible by public transport. It was the headquarters of the YMCA in the UK. And it was well known as the hub of evangelical activity in London.

In fact, no less than Cardinal Newman, John Henry Newman, the infamous Anglican-turned-Roman Catholic had written a sarcastic diatribe against Exeter Hall in 1838, almost two decades before Spurgeon appeared there. Newman hated the place because to him it symbolized the large-scale growth and popularity of Protestant evangelicalism in England, which Newman deplored. He ridiculed the evangelical movement as artificial, superficial, and ugly.

And let's face it: in Newman's time, evangelicalism was already flirting with shallow intellectualism, pragmatism, and cheesy revivalistic tactics. Those same tendencies have come into full flower in our age.

Major changes had taken place in British Evangelicalism during the first half of the 19th century, and most of them were not good. The days of Benjamin Keach were long gone, when non-conformists were commonly placed in stocks, held up for public ridicule, and looked upon as society's outcasts. Evangelicalism had steadily become more and more genteel and very

popular among the upper and middle classes. There was a strong move already underway to make the evangelical *message* more refined and more respectable. England has always had strong class distinctions, and 19th-century evangelicals desperately wanted to seem socially well-bred.

Exeter Hall with its impressive location in the Strand symbolized that—so it was a convenient brick-and-mortar symbol for Cardinal Newman to attack. It represented everything he hated about evangelicalism, both good and bad. On top of all that, Exeter Hall had been a hotbed of opposition to the Tractarians of the Oxford movement, and Newman's leadership in that movement, of course, was what first brought him to public prominence. He began his ministry as an evangelical and a Calvinist, and then turned against what he once proclaimed.

In that 1838 article, published in a periodical called *British Critic*, Newman quoted from a quaint book titled, *Random Recollections of Exeter Hall*, by an anonymous author who identified himself only as "one of the Protestant Party." Newman quotes that and says, "Is this joke or earnest?"—so you can hear the tone of his contempt.

And Newman quotes this book's description of Exeter Hall, which is detailed enough to give you a sense of its vast size. (Remember as I read this that the main auditorium at Grace Church seats fewer than 3,000). Listen as "one of the Protestant party" describes the main auditorium at Exeter Hall:

The large room of Exeter Hall was built to contain 4000 persons, with a splendid range of raised seats, to the left of the main entrance, a spacious area in front of it, and a platform, which of itself will accommodate

500 persons, to the right. At the back of the platform were formerly two sunk galleries, like the side-boxes of a theater, which were opened or closed at pleasure, by means of moveable planks, which may be put aside during the progress of a meeting. They are now thrown completely open. The platform itself is elevated about six feet above the floor of the area, or central seats, and is finished in front by a handsome iron rail; the large and ornamental bars of which, placed about one foot from each other, are connected at top by a thick mahogany spar. In the centre of its front row stands the chair, which in form much resembles that of King Edward the Confessor, in Westminster Abbey. It is of handsomely carved mahogany, with massy open elbows, and is cushioned, in the seat and back, with purple leather. Its dimensions are very large, and any gentleman of small, or even of moderate size, who may preside, can never be said to fill it. Very few chairmen appear to advantage there; some seem lost in it, others, at a loss how to occupy it, and where to sit in it, whether backwards or forwards, upright or lounging, to the right or to the left.

The book (which, by the way, you can read for yourself at Google Books) goes on to say this:

The conformation of the Hall is not favourable to the larger class of human voices, and there are but few speakers who make themselves well heard throughout the room: the generality speak too low, or have too little power of lungs to be heard far beyond the centre of the area; while others, who almost deafen the sitters near them, are equally unintelligible to those at a distance, from the echo of the place itself. Thus the gentle speeches of [Lord] Chichester, and the

thundering oratory of Dr. Duff are nearly all alike pantomime to the occupants of the raised seats; though from diametrically opposite causes, for the Doctor speaks just as much too loud as their Lordships' voices are too low.

There was a massive pipe organ and a vast choir loft behind the speaker, and engravings of the time show the choir loft full of about 200 listeners while Spurgeon was speaking.

Spurgeon evidently managed to make himself heard and understood in that vast room without any amplification, because I have never read a single suggestion otherwise.

But given his youthfulness, his theological stance, and his meteoric rise to fame out of nowhere, I suppose it was predictable that Spurgeon would face critics.

Still, the force and antagonism of his critics caught Spurgeon by surprise. He was lampooned by cartoonists. He was attacked in print by newspaper columnists. He was criticized by other ministers who were jealous of his success or hostile to his doctrine. And he was relentlessly mocked by the enemies of everything holy.

Now, let's face it: Spurgeon was a bit of a country bumpkin when he first came to London. He had no sense of style or sophistication, and that made it hard to get by in London, the most cosmopolitan city in the world. Spurgeon's wife was a teenage girl when Spurgeon first preached at New Park Street, and she recalled how the thing that caught her attention on that first Sunday was a polka-dotted handkerchief that he kept waving as if to add flourish to his gestures. Here's what Susannah Spurgeon said years later:

If the whole truth be told, I was not at all fascinated by the young orator's eloquence, while his countrified

manner and speech excited more regret than reverence. Alas, for my vain and foolish heart! I was not spiritually-minded enough to understand his earnest presentation of the Gospel and his powerful pleading with sinners;—but the huge, black satin stock, the long badly-trimmed hair, and the blue pocket handkerchief with white spots which he himself has so graphically described,—these attracted most of my attention and . . . awakened some feelings of amusement.

That's from the girl who married Spurgeon. His critics were unmerciful. Let me read you one example from an article published in April 1855 in *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*. The critic writes:

"Just now, the great lion, star, meteor, or whatever else he may be called, of the Baptists, is the Rev. M. [sic] Spurgeon, minister of Park Street Chapel, Southwark. He has created a perfect furor in the religious world. Every Sunday, crowds throng to Exeter Hall—where for some weeks past he has been preaching during the enlargement of his own chapel,—as to some great dramatic entertainment. The huge hall is crowded to overflowing, morning and evening, with an excited auditory, whose good fortune in obtaining admission is often envied by the hundreds outside who throng the closed doors.

For a parallel to such popularity, we must go back to Dr. Chalmers, Edward Irving, or the earlier days of James Parsons. But I will not dishonor such men by comparison with the Exeter Hall religious demagogue. They preached the gospel with all the fervour of earnest natures. *Mr. Spurgeon preaches himself*. He is nothing unless he is an actor,—unless exhibiting that matchless impudence which is his great characteristic,

indulging in coarse', familiarity with holy things, declaiming in a ranting and colloquial style, strutting up and down the platform as though he were at the Surrey Theater, and boasting of his own intimacy with Heaven with nauseating frequency. His fluency, self-possession, oratorical tricks, and daring utterances, seem to fascinate his less thoughtful hearers, who love excitement more than devotion .... I have glanced at one or two of Mr. Spurgeon's published sermons, and turned away in disgust from the coarse sentiments, the scholastical expressions, and clap-trap style I have discovered.

It would seem that the poor young man's brain is turned by the notoriety he has acquired and the incense offered at his shrine. From the very pulpit he boasts of the crowds that flock to listen to his rodomontade. . . .

By the end of the year, not less than 200,000 of his published trashy sermons would be scattered over the length and breadth of the land. . . .

I don't think he has been invited to take part in any [denominational] meetings. Nor, indeed, does he seek such fellowship. He glories in his position of lofty isolation, and is intoxicated by the draughts of popularity that have fired his feverish brain. He is a nine days' wonder,—a comet that has suddenly shot across the religious atmosphere. He has gone up like a rocket, and [before] long will come down like a stick.

The most melancholy consideration in the case is the diseased craving for excitement which this running after Mr. Spurgeon by the 'religious world' indicates. I would charitably conclude that the greater part of the multitude that weekly crowd to his

theatrical exhibitions consists of people who are not in the habit of frequenting a place of worship."

On the very same day that article appeared, another London periodical, *The Bucks Chronicle*, published an equally vitriolic attack on Spurgeon, by an anonymous writer who said this:

We had thought the day for dogmatic, theologic dramatizing, was past,—that we should never more see the massive congregation listening to outrageous manifestations of insanity,—no more hear the fanatical effervescence of ginger-pop sermonizing, or be called upon to wipe away the froth, that the people might see the colour of the stuff. In this we were mistaken. A star has appeared in the misty plain of orthodoxy . . . It has made its appearance in Exeter Hall.

This particular writer was clearly an Arminian who was provoked by Spurgeon's Calvinism, because listen how he caricatured Spurgeon's message. He said Spurgeon teaches—

that, if Jack Scroggins was put down in the black book before the great curtain of events was unfolded, that the said Jack Scroggins, in spite of all he may do or say, will and must tumble into the limbo of a brimstone hell, to be punished and roasted, without any prospect of cessation, or shrinking into a dried cinder; because Jack Scroggins had [merely] done what Jack Scroggins could not help doing.

It is not pleasant to be frightened into the portal of bliss by the hissing bubbles of the seething cauldron. It is not Christianlike to say, 'God must wash brains in the Hyper-Calvinism a Spurgeon teaches before man can enter Heaven.' It does not harmonize with the quiet majesty of the Nazarene. It does not fall like

manna for hungry souls; but is like the gush of the pouring rain in a thunderstorm, which makes the flowers to hang their heads, looking up afterwards as if nothing had happened. When the Exeter Hall stripling talks of Deity, let him remember that He is superior to profanity, and that blasphemy from a parson is as great a crime as when the lowest grade of humanity utters the brutal oath at which the virtuous stand aghast.

That might actually comfort some of you who thought vitriol and verbal abuse were invented to fill up the blogosphere. That same flavor of controversy was popular in Spurgeon's time, too.

Spurgeon did not take any delight in that sort of debate, but he wasn't intimidated by it, either. He was gifted with words and quick-witted, and he was certainly adept at using sharp-edged humor. He was capable of leveling stinging reproaches against his doctrinal adversaries. In fact, Spurgeon staunchly defended the use of humor, sarcasm, and even ridicule against evil. But he did not think it appropriate to *default* to that style of argument. And he was never mean-spirited towards his adversaries themselves, even when he was heaping scorn and derision on their false doctrines. He believed the level of spleen-venting we do should be commensurate with the gravity and immediacy of the error.

Here's another incident that illustrates Spurgeon's patience and good humor with his adversaries:

When Spurgeon came to London, one of the best-known preachers in the city was a hyper-Calvinist named James Wells, who pastored Surrey Tabernacle in south London, not far from where the Metropolitan Tabernacle was eventually built. James Wells was quite

a gifted preacher who at the height of his fame drew 1500 people each Sunday. But he was often cantankerous and savage with his criticism. (Frankly, that seems to be the besetting sin of hyper-Calvinists.) In January 1855, at the start of Spurgeon's first year at New Park Street, James Wells sent a long letter to the editor of *The Earthen Vessel* (a high-Calvinist periodical). He wrote anonymously under the pseudonym "Job," but it was well-known who the true author was. In that letter he cited Spurgeon's testimony of conversion at age 15. Then Wells said this:

Heaven grant it may prove to be so,—for the young man's sake, and for that of others also! But I have—*most solemnly have—my doubts* as to the Divine reality of his conversion. I do not say—it is not for me to say—that he is not a regenerated man; but this I do know, that there are conversions which are not of God. Spurgeon said nothing in reply, but of course, the paper was besieged with more letters from their readers, both pro and con. The next month Wells wrote again, stubbornly refusing to soften or withdraw his suggestion that Spurgeon was an unconverted man. He said, "I am at present (instead of being shaken,) more than ever *confirmed* in what I have written. I beg therefore to say that anything said upon the subject by Mr. Spurgeon's friends will be to me as straws thrown against a stone wall . . . of which I shall take no notice."

As far as I know, Wells never did relax his bitter contempt for Spurgeon. Once they encountered one another in the street, and Wells asked Spurgeon whether he had ever seen the inside of Surrey Tabernacle. Trying to be polite, Spurgeon said, no, but he would very much like to see it.

Wells told him that if he'd would come on a Monday morning he would show him around. That would give enough time to ventilate the place before Sunday.

Spurgeon then asked Wells if he had ever seen the inside of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Wells said yes, he had come by there on a recent Saturday and looked around.

"Ah," Spurgeon, said. "So that accounts for the delightful fragrance in our services that week!"

Spurgeon was an immensely patient man and a careful critic, preferring to dismantle errors meticulously with Scripture rather than blasting every target with large canons.

Regarding the mean-spirited style of discourse, Spurgeon said, "That is a style to which one can be *easily* educated. I do not think anybody ought to pay very heavy fees to be a *nasty* critic; one can grow into that with a little watering very speedily."

As I have said, Spurgeon certainly didn't relish controversy or seek it. Those earliest controversies came to him and were mainly sparked by other people's petty resentments against this young man who was enjoying so much success and who was (even at a young age) already so firm in his opinions.

Incidentally, this is one of the remarkable things about Spurgeon: from the start of his ministry to the end, his theology remained substantially the same. I do not know of any major issue on which Spurgeon ever changed his position. He was no reed shaken in the water. It was the furthest thing from his personality to be carried about by every wind of doctrine. I'm not aware of a single instance in which Spurgeon had to retract something he preached or published. There may be some incidental details he changed or refined, but Spurgeon

did not budge on any major doctrine from the start of his ministry until the day he died.

I mentioned that fact once on my blog and an army of postmodernized young readers were absolutely outraged. The conventional wisdom today suggests that it's the very essence of humility to undergo regular paradigm shifts where from time to time you have to acknowledge that you have been totally wrong in some fundamental aspect of your belief system. You can renounce and ridicule everything you believed last year and still claim to be humble, but if you hold steady to the same worldview you embraced ten years ago and refuse to budge, that is regarded as irrefutable proof that you are the arrogant one.

For the record, the reason Spurgeon was so steady in his beliefs is that he didn't speak at all on an issue until he had studied it and settled the matter in his heart. In those early years at New Park Street and Exeter Hall, he preached through the very basics of biblical truth. He avoided anything speculative or doubtful. He never reached beyond his own understanding like a lot of young preachers do, trying to deal with advanced issues before he has had a reasonable opportunity to study the matter thoroughly and come to a firm, unshakable conviction.

But that is not to suggest that Spurgeon aspired to be vague or ambivalent on important doctrines. He loved soundness, thoroughness, clarity, and firm convictions—and he cultivated all those things in his own approach to theology.

And that is the very thing that made controversy inevitable for Spurgeon. He was a voice of clarity and firm conviction during an era when practically everyone else was willing to put all the core doctrines of Christianity back on the table for negotiation. That

eagerness to reinvent and reimagine Christianity to make it more suitable to the modern mind was the central error of the modernists. It is likewise the most dangerous aspect of postmodernists in the church today. And Spurgeon was of the opposite mind, convinced that faithful Christians needed to hang on to and contend for the faith once delivered to the saints. So conflict was inevitable.

Iain Murray wrote the best book about Spurgeon the controversialist, and I'm certain many of you have read it. It's one of the classics of 20th-century Christian publishing: *The Forgotten Spurgeon*. Murray traces three major controversies that spanned Spurgeon's career: A conflict over Spurgeon's Calvinism; a massive debate Spurgeon sparked with the Anglican Church over baptismal regeneration; and finally the Down-Grade Controversy.

There were of course a lot more controversies than those, but those are the major, representative ones and Iain Murray's book is the single best resource to read if you want proof that Spurgeon was not the safe, broadly tolerant, always-congenial type of person twentieth-century evangelicals always seemed to want to make him out to be.

The fact is, Spurgeon's own autobiography made the very same point Iain Murray was making: that Spurgeon was no stranger to controversy. The original autobiography, of course, is a massive four-volume work that was compiled posthumously by Mrs. Spurgeon and Spurgeon's personal secretary, Joseph Harrald. Having stood shoulder to shoulder with Spurgeon through those grueling years of the Down-Grade Controversy, Mr. Harrald was eager to make clear this side of Spurgeon for posterity—because this was the best way to

appreciate Spurgeon's courage, his steadfastness, and his willingness to suffer for Christ's sake.

Chapter 53 in the original version of the autobiography bears all the earmarks of having been written by Joseph Harrald. It's titled, "The Down-Grade Controversy Foreshadowed," And it chronicles the early controversies Spurgeon was involved in.

The chapter opens with some quotations from Spurgeon about the necessity of controversy. He quoted Spurgeon recognizing, for example, that lots of Christians in that era were more concerned about decorum and respectability than with truth. They considered it a crude and vile thing to refute false doctrine or point out "the faults of the church and of the age." Spurgeon's answer: "If this be vile, we propose to be viler still." That was from 1856, less than two years after Spurgeon took the pulpit in London.

Here's another quote Harrald cites, from 11 years later, fully 20 years before the Down-Grade Controversy. Spurgeon says:

As good stewards we must maintain the cause of truth against all comers.

"Never get into religious controversies," says one; that is to say, being interpreted, be a Christian soldier, but let your sword rust in its scabbard, and sneak into heaven like a coward.

Such advice I cannot endorse. If God has called you by the truth, maintain the truth, which has been the means of your salvation. We are not to be pugnacious, always contending for every crotchet of our own; but wherein we have learned the truth of the Holy Spirit, we are not tamely to see that standard torn down which our fathers upheld at peril of their blood.

This is an age in which truth must be maintained zealously, vehemently, continually. Playing fast and loose as many do, believing this to-day and that to-morrow, is the sure mark of children of wrath; but having received the truth, to hold fast the very form of it, as Paul bids Timothy to do, is one of the duties of heirs of heaven. Stand fast for truth, and may God give the victory to the faithful.

Spurgeon's stature in the public perception rose steadily over the years, of course. It got to the point where when he spoke, people listened, and didn't reflexively write off his strong opinions as the dreams of an idealistic youth.

As a result, Spurgeon's ministry went through a relatively peaceful time from the early 1870s through about 1886 during which Spurgeon was not constantly embroiled in major controversies. (There were controversies even then, but they weren't publicized on the front pages of the city newspapers or talked about on such a public scale.) So when the Down-Grade Controversy broke out in 1887, Spurgeon's critics tried to write off his opposition to the modernist juggernaut as the half-demented ravings of a once-kindly preacher who suddenly was showing signs of losing his mind and his inhibitions.

Joseph Harrald answers that claim definitively in chapter 53 of the autobiography. Here's how he begins the chapter, immediately after those three quotations from a younger Spurgeon about the importance of fighting for the truth.

Harrald says,

WHEN, in 1887, there arose the great "Down-grade" controversy, in which Mr. Spurgeon was to prove himself Christ's faithful witness and *martyr*, many people were foolish enough to suppose that he had

adopted a new role, and some said that he would have done more good by simply preaching the gospel, and leaving the so-called "heretics" to go their own way! Such critics must have been strangely unfamiliar with his whole history, for, from the very beginning of his ministry, he had earnestly contended for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Long before *The Sword and the Trowel* appeared, with its monthly "record of combat with sin and of labor for the Lord," its Editor had been busily occupied both in battling and building,—vigorously combating error in all its forms, and, at the same time, edifying and establishing in the faith those who had been brought to a knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus.

Then Harrald goes on to give the details of Spurgeon's earliest controversies. I only have time to introduce one of them and give you the gist of it. Then you need to read that chapter—and the rest of Spurgeon's autobiography—if you want to get a better sense of Spurgeon the controversialist.

Joseph Harrald says the first actual theological or philosophical controversy Spurgeon was drawn into was—of all things—a dispute about church music. More specifically, it was a debate over the propriety and substance of a hymnbook written by a Congregational minister named Thomas Toke Lynch. His hymn-book was a collection of mediocre doggerel mostly celebrating God's handiwork in nature, titled *The Rivulet*.

Look that one up (Google "rivulet controversy"), because the whole matter is a fascinating story, filled with many lessons about our contemporary worship wars and all the disputes that occur today over music in the church. If you look at Google Books or the Internet

Archive, you'll even find a full copy of the hymnbook *The Rivulet*, so you can read the hymnbook for yourself. There's also a copy of the full memoir of Thomas T. Lynch on line, and he includes an extensive narrative of the controversy from his point of view.

Anyway, the poetry in *The Rivulet* was mostly awful, the hymns were mostly insipid, and clear doctrine and biblical truth were mostly absent from Lynch's Hymns. Here's a sample. This is a hymn about the virtues of meditation:

Our heart is like a little pool,  
Left by the ebbing sea;  
Of crystal waters still and cool,  
When we rest musingly

I think that's almost as funny as it is bad, because tide-pools are actually best known for the horrible stench they generate. But anyway, that sort of thing was wildly popular with a certain class of genteel religious people in Victorian times.

Not all of Lynch's hymns were that bad, of course. A couple of them survived in some 20th-century hymnbooks. We used to sing one when I was a student at Moody: "Gracious Spirit, dwell with me; I myself would gracious be."

Spurgeon didn't start the Rivulet Controversy. It was started by a newspaper editor, James Grant, who published an unfavorable review of *The Rivulet* in a periodical titled *The Morning Advertiser*. Grant said things like, "From beginning to end, there is not one particle of vital religion or evangelical piety" in the book. He said that "nearly the whole of the hymns might have been written by a Deist." He said "a very large portion might be sung by a congregation of Freethinkers."

Grant was using a bit of hyperbole, I think, but I have read Lynch's hymns, I have to say Grant's criticism really isn't *that* far off. Most of the hymns fit Grant's description. There are a few blessed exceptions, but they are the exceptions and not the rule.

Controversy continued for months. Another editor, Dr. John Campbell, of *The British Banner*, jumped into the fray. I want you to meet John Campbell. Here's a description of him from an 1892 book titled, *History of Congregationalism from the Apostolic Age to the present*. They say:

As a newspaper editor, he was a veritable Boanerges, pouring forth the burning lava of his invective on all abuses, heresies, and vices. [However, they also say,] As an editor of religious magazines, he achieved an almost unprecedented success, not by any meretricious attractions, not by any pictorial illustrations, not by the sensationalism of religious story-telling, but by strictly Scriptural teaching.

But Dr. Campbell was also given to hyperbole in his critiques. Here is that same book's account of his entry into the Rivulet Controversy: The writer says that the debate—

had the effect of stirring up the latent fires in the great heart of Dr. Campbell, editor of the British Banner. He rushed into this "Rivulet Controversy" with even more than his wonted energy, and asserted with an exaggeration lamentably ludicrous, that "nothing like it had occurred within the memory of the present generation, or, perhaps, since the days of the Reformation."

In the gentler part of his critique, Dr. Campbell said Thomas Lynch's hymns were "crude, disjointed, unmeaning, unchristian, ill-rhymed rubbish."

By now the controversy was really out of proportion to the issue. The rhetoric and the passions on both sides were already overheated. And so far Spurgeon had not uttered a peep about it. But because of his popularity and influence, many of his closest friends and fellow ministers were insistent that he needed to take one side or another.

Now if I read things correctly, it seems to me Spurgeon wasn't at all happy about the position this forced him into. He didn't approve of exaggerated criticism and he didn't like it when inflated passions clouded or crowded out rational arguments in the war for the truth.

And yet from a purely biblical and theological point of view Spurgeon clearly agreed with the critics of *The Rivulet*. So after watching the controversy rage for about five months, Spurgeon finally entered the fray with a gentler, more reasonable critique of the hymnal, titled "Mine Opinion." Lynch later said that Spurgeon was the only one of his major critics who treated him with true respect. He wrote,

This Review of Mr. Spurgeon's enjoys the credit with me of being the only thing on his side—that is, against me—that was impertinent, without being malevolent. It evinced far more ability and appreciation than Grant or Campbell had done, and indicated a man whose eyes, if they do not get blinded with the fumes of that strong, but unwholesome, incense, Popularity, may glow with a heavenlier brightness than it seems to me they have yet done.

Here's a sample of what Spurgeon wrote. Notice how he used humor to defuse the dark passions. He said,

These hymns rise up in the Rivulet like mermaids—there is much form and comeliness upon the surface,

but their nether parts, I ween, it were hard to describe. Perhaps they are not the fair things they seem: when I look below their glistening eyes and flowing hair, I think I discern some meaner nature joined with the form divine, but the surface of this Rivulet is green with beautifully-flowering weeds, and I can scarcely see into the depths where lurks the essence of the matter.

He was using a parody of Lynch's own style to show the silliness of the hymns. Lynch got the point. In his account of the controversy he said Spurgeon "saw enough in the 'glistening eyes' of the mermaids to suspect that they might have a fishy body and a snaky tail. But he confessed that he did not see the said tail."

Spurgeon went on:

If I should ever be on amicable terms with the chief of the Ojibewas, I might suggest several verses from Mr. Lynch as a portion of a liturgy to be used on the next occasion when he bows before the Great Spirit of the West Wind. Hark! O ye Delawares, Mohawks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Blackfeet, Pawnees, Shawnees, and Cherokees, here is your primitive faith most sweetly rehearsed-not in your own wild notes but in the white man's language"

and then he quoted one of the hymns:

'My God, in nature I confess  
A beauty fraught with holiness;  
Love written plainly I descry  
My life's commandment in the sky;  
Oh, still to me the days endear,  
When lengthening light leads on the year!'

But Spurgeon closed his article by suggesting it was time for the raging controversy to end, because this little volume really didn't warrant so much fuss. He wrote,

Liberty of conscience is every man's right; our writer has spoken his mind, why should he alone provoke attack when many others, who agree quite as little with our views, are allowed to escape? The battle is either a tribute to superior ability, or else a sign of the times; I believe it to be both. The work has its errors, in the estimation of one who does not fear to subscribe himself a Calvinistic Christian, but it has no more evil leaven than other books of far less merit. No one would have read it with a jealous eye unless it had been made the centre of a controversy, for we should either have let it quietly alone, or should have forgotten the deleterious mixture, and retained the little good which it certainly contains. The author did not write for us; he wrote for men of his own faith. Thus ended Spurgeon's first controversy. It was a relatively minor one for him.

But Spurgeon found it necessary soon afterward to attack even more sinister trends toward humanism and Socinian doctrines. Then came the famous baptismal regeneration controversy, a series of controversies over creeping high-church and Romanist tendencies in the Anglican establishment, conflicts with hyper-Calvinists, disputes with stylish innovators like Dr. Parker, resistance to several Arminian and revivalist tendencies, opposition from certain Darbyite Brethren churchmen, the struggle against scientific rationalism, a sustained defense of the authority of Scripture, and finally the Down-Grade Controversy.

In fact, as Joseph Harrald points out, all the lesser conflicts were merely prelude and preparation for the Down-Grade Controversy, in which all the other issues came together.

I wish we had sufficient time to survey them all, and perhaps if the pattern follows, in eight years or so they'll ask me to do another biographical seminar on Spurgeon, and I'll take up here where we are leaving off.

But let me summarize the point of today's message for you: Spurgeon's ministry was controversial in its day not because he was pugnacious. He wasn't. He was tender-hearted, patient, a good-humored man with a large heart. But he was devoted to the truth, and that made him a dedicated enemy of error. The lord blessed him with a voice, with a brain, and with the influence to be the kind of warrior he was, and Providence often placed him in circumstances that demanded battle. Thankfully for the church, Spurgeon was willing to fight, even at the cost of his life.

You may have noticed in an excerpt I read earlier that Joseph Harrald referred to Spurgeon as a *martyr*. I believe that is accurate. Spurgeon believed that, too. I had the privilege a few years ago of reading through a stack of letters Spurgeon wrote to his flock at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in the final weeks before he died. I actually held the papers in my hand that Spurgeon wrote on and read that last, bittersweet set of letters he wrote.

He knew he was dying, and he himself said it was the fight that was killing him—the incredible stress of the Down-Grade Controversy. His attempts to awaken evangelicals to the dangers of modernism were mostly in vain. From the perspective of earthly opinion polls, the stand Spurgeon took did little immediate good. He died feeling to a large degree that his campaign against Modernism had been mostly in vain.

But he wasn't demoralized. He knew he would be vindicated in time, because he knew the gates of hell

cannot prevail against the truth of God and the church of God. What he actually accomplished in that fight was monumental, and we who desire to remain faithful to the truth of God's Word still benefit from Spurgeon's work.

We also need to follow his example. Controversy is even more politically incorrect today than it was in Spurgeon's time. But for that very reason, the church is desperately in need of men who will fight the good fight, much as Spurgeon did, even though we know that is not going to win us any accolades from the world, much less from the main bastions of evangelical opinion.