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James Culross, C.H. Spurgeon and the Crisis of British Baptist Confessionalism, 1887–8: Part I, the Letters

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ABSTRACT

Initially drawn to this subject because Culross wrote a nineteenth-century biography on John Ryland Jr. (1753–1825) who was the subject of my PhD, I encountered letters held at Bristol Baptist College noting the friendship between James Culross and C.H. Spurgeon, along with their correspondence with others, during the Downgrade Controversy. This two part publication seeks to convey the central contents of their correspondence during this controversy, and probe the essence of their subtly divergent views of Baptist confessionalism in an attempt to gain a more complete understanding of what was a complex controversy.

KEYWORDS

James Culross; C.H. Spurgeon; Downgrade Controversy; confessionalism; romanticism; liberalism

Introduction

The Downgrade Controversy (1887–8) is a notable event in British, and indeed global Baptist history, and even beyond. Though well known, it is much less understood. New sources are most helpful in shedding fresh light upon complex moments. Held at Bristol Baptist College, Bristol, and Spurgeon's College, London, are four letters that form a correspondence between two friends, James Culross (1824–99) and Charles H. Spurgeon (1834–92) in the autumn of 1887, just weeks after Spurgeon's resignation from the Baptist Union (BU).¹ Culross was the Principal of Bristol Baptist College and President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland during the Downgrade; Spurgeon, the celebrity preacher of the Metropolitan Tabernacle and its ministries. Though friends and ministry colleagues, cultural and theological changes meant that on the subject of confessionalism, as accentuated by the Downgrade, Culross and Spurgeon took subtly divergent views. This correspondence is a critical window not only into their friendship but the heart of the

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¹(Letter one) Culross to Spurgeon, November 22, 1887 (Spurgeon's College).

[Draft of letter one] Culross to Spurgeon, Nov 21, 1887 (Bristol Baptist College Archives [BBCA] 14717).

(Letter two) Spurgeon to Culross, November 26, 1887 (BBCA 14720).

(Letter three) Culross to Spurgeon, December 2, 1887 (Spurgeon's College).

[Draft of letter three] Culross to Spurgeon, December 2, 1887 (BBCA 14717).

(Letter Four) Spurgeon to Culross, December 5, 1887 (BBCA 14720).

controversy itself and the wider movements that were afoot. In this article, these letters will be presented in their entirety for the readership and will be followed by a second article that will analyse them contextually critically to understand the Downgrade from the angle of the Culross-Spurgeon friendship.

The manuscript letters are largely historiographically neglected and remain unpublished. Norman Moon noted these letters as an important source in the history of the Downgrade.² In the same year, E.A. Payne referenced eight letters from this wider collection³ but did not engage heavily with them.⁴ When Hopkins wrote on the subject he only referenced two of these letters and these he cited from Payne.⁵ He later made minimal use of the Spurgeon's College letters but not those at Bristol.⁶ Neither the letters nor the relationship between the two men is noted in the wider historiography of Spurgeon, the Downgrade or the Baptist and Evangelical historical surveys of the period.⁷ One exception to this is the appearance of an original letter held at Bristol in Spurgeon's *Autobiography*, which has been occasionally cited.⁸ Therefore, it is safe to say these letters, while known, have been neglected. Given the prominent positions these two men held during the Downgrade, the neglect of their friendship and these letters is surprising.

The Downgrade took its name from two articles that appeared in *The Sword and The Trowel* in March and April of 1887, which claimed orthodox theology amongst Dissenters was on the 'down grade.' As early as 1877 Spurgeon had concern over the 'new theology' he believed had entered the fringe of the denomination. A decade later Spurgeon took the 'Downgrade' up himself in an August 1887 article and continued the protest. He was shocked by how many did not take his alarm seriously, even how it was treated as a joke at the autumn Assembly of the BU. Spurgeon resigned from the BU on October 28, announced this in the *Sword and Trowel* in November and left for his annual winter break in Menton, France, on November 7. According to Hopkins, the Downgrade had moved from phase one into

²Norman Moon, *Education for Ministry: Bristol Baptist College, 1679–1979* (Northampton: Stanley L. Hunt, 1979), 54–7, and 124.

³The wider collection of which these are a part are titled, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Letters to James Culross: Down Grade Controversy, 1883 & 1887* (G96 Box F, BBCA). This has also been digitized (BBCA 14720). Other letters in the file include those between Culross and Angus, Booth, Clifford, Greenhough, Lockhart, MacLaren, Thew and Williams, and Spurgeon to Grange and Mrs. Knight.

⁴E.A. Payne, "The Down Grade Controversy: A Postscript," *BQ* 28, no. 4 (Oct 1979): 146–58.

⁵Mark T.E. Hopkins, "Spurgeon's Opponents in the Downgrade Controversy," *BQ* 32, no. 6 (1988): 274–94.

⁶Mark Hopkins, "The Downgrade Controversy," in *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation: Evangelical and Liberal Theologies in Victorian England*. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 206, 243.

⁷For example, references to these letters do not appear in Baptist surveys such as: J.H.Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the 19th Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1994); Ernest A. Payne, *The Baptist Union*, 3rd ed. (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1982), though the original edition came out before his postscript was published; or evangelical surveys such as David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); David Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Leicester: IVP, 2005); works on Dissent such as Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters, vol. III: The Crisis and Conscience of Non-conformity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2015); or works handling Spurgeon or the Down Grade such as Hopkins, *Non-conformity's Romantic Generation*, though some of these do mention Culross.

⁸*Autobiography of C.H. Spurgeon*, Vol. IV (Chicago: Curts and Jennings, 1900), 262–64; cited in J.H.Y. Briggs, *English Baptists of the 19th Century*, 173; and Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 161.

phase two.⁹ While after some delay Culross did write to his friend, a note from Mrs Culross to Samuel H. Booth (BU Secretary) reveals the consternation Spurgeon's resignation was causing her husband. She wrote, 'trusting that you may soon have some relief from all this worry and trouble.'¹⁰ Amidst a variety of parties that emerged as to the best way to handle Spurgeon's resignation, Culross and Booth worked frantically to 'stop the contagion spreading.'¹¹ Booth's words and actions were often directly influenced by Culross as President. The correspondence between Culross and Spurgeon centred around two issues, but especially the latter, Spurgeon's reason for and mode of leaving the BU and the efficacy of creeds in preserving truth.

LETTER ONE: Culross to Spurgeon, Nov 22, 1887¹² (Spurgeon's)¹³

⁹Hopkins, *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation*, ch. 7.

¹⁰Mrs. Culross to Samuel Booth, November 14, 1887 (Angus, Downgrade Papers, D/Dow 2 boxes, 7.3.4).

¹¹Culross to Booth, early November 1887 (Angus, Downgrade Papers, D/Dow 2 boxes, 7.3.3).

¹²A draft of letter one is held at Bristol (Culross to Spurgeon, Nov 21, 1887 [BBCA 14717]):
Bristol. 21 Nov. 1887

My Dear Mr. Spurgeon,

I have written you twice within the last few weeks, but on both occasions have destroyed what I wrote instead of posting. The letter signed by Aldis, Angus and Maclaren, with the preparations of which I had to do, and of which I enclose a slip, fairly expresses my mind. Every word implying affection for yourself and thankfulness to God for all that He has enabled you to do has my fullest consent.

Were I to make any change in the terms of the enclosed slip, it would be to lay more emphasis on the profession made by all who come to baptism and the Lord's Supper. As Baptists we make distinct and solemn profession of personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and take our place among His disciples—the meaning of discipleship being fixed by Himself. In all that relates to Christian truth His authority is acknowledged to be supreme; what He says is final. We express our belief in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We engage to live under Christ's rule in all things. Then, taking our place at the Lord's table, and receiving His word, we (1) own ourselves sinners; (2) we occupy our place as forgiven sinners; (3) we recognise that our forgiveness is due to the Saviour's 'shed blood.' There may be differences between good men when they try to explain how it is that the death of Christ brings pardon,—in other words, when they theorize about the atonement; but every attempted explanation is false that does not contain these three things in it. For my own part I do not trust in an explanation or theory of atonement, but in the fact itself. How far-reaching and deep is the profession made through the two ordinances—how formative of true views the ordinances are is well understood among us—deserves to be insisted on in our preaching and teaching to the full. If any man has renounced this profession (whether this is known to others or not) he has no legitimate place in the Baptist Union, and as an honest man should seek fellowship elsewhere.

Beyond all that is in the enclosed slip, there are some things I should like to say, writing directly to yourself; and I am not going to dishonour you by apologizing for straight speech.

I do not know what private and personal dealings you have had with erring brethren, and with what result. That of course ought not to be blazed abroad. But I earnestly wish that, before going to the public with accusations so grave and so general, you had adopted means by which the charge against any particular man could be sifted, both sides being heard, inside the Union itself. I speak of course in the dark; but I would have expected a righteous issue—probably this issue, 'Thou hast gained thy brother.' I cannot think that Christian men would have resented such a course.

I can see the necessity of carefully sifting reports, and hearing both sides, by what has happened with myself. I am reported in letters and newspapers—and people believe it—to have written an address for Sheffield on the 'Down Grade,' when in point of fact (as I stated publicly) the address had been put together long previously—from a special point of view; I lying ill in bed and unable even to revise proof at the time when your pamphlet reached me. In any case, having a good conscience, it is a small matter to be judged of man's judgement: but it might be a very serious thing for others, unless we come face to face.

I have long been alive to the dangers that exist to-day, especially for our younger men—and have been earnestly endeavouring to counteract them, not without success in several cases; but, in judging as fairly as I can from the facts known to me in my own circle, I am bound to say that, in no body of the same magnitude in the land, will there be found more faithfulness to our Divine Saviour and Lord than is found, by God's grace, among our ministers. And I look round on true-hearted men labouring for Christ with heroic patience, in obscure places, in the face of immense discouragements, against whom (I am told) your articles are already being mercilessly used, in ways that you never meant.

Every Christian man should be ready to declare as well as to give a reason for the hope that is in him; but, when the winds are blowing from every quarter, I do not believe that we are to be kept right by adopting a

Culross hesitated to write as he searched his soul for what to say amidst the complexity of the controversy and his own warm feelings toward Spurgeon. Eventually he broke his silence and wrote to Menton from Bristol:

Bristol. 22 Nov. 1887

My Dear Mr. Spurgeon,

I have written you twice within the last few weeks, but on both occasions have destroyed what I wrote instead of posting. The letter signed by Aldis, Angus and MacClaren, with the preparations of which I had to do, and of which I enclose a slip,¹⁴ fairly expresses my mind. Every word implying affection for yourself and thankfulness to God for all that He has enabled you to do has my fullest consent.

Were I to make any change in the terms of the slip, it would be, to lay more emphasis on the profession made by all who come to baptism and the Lord's Supper. As Baptists—and this differentiates us from those who practise infant sprinkling—we make distinct and solemn profession of personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and take our place among His disciples—though the meaning of discipleship being fixed by Himself. In all that relates to Christian truth His authority is acknowledged to be supreme; His word is final. We express our belief in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We engage to live under Christ's rule, learning and observing all things whatsoever He has commanded. Taking our place at the Lord's table, and receiving His word, we (1) own ourselves sinners; (2) we occupy our place as forgiven sinners; (3) we recognise that our forgiveness is due to the Saviour's 'shed blood.' There may be differences between good men when they try to explain how it is that the death of Christ brings pardon, in other words, when they theorize about the atonement; but every attempted explanation is manifestly false that does not contain these three things in it. For my own part I do not trust in an explanation or theory of atonement, but in the fact itself. How far-reaching and deep is the doctrine of the two ordinances,¹⁵ how formative of true views in all other departments of Christian truth, need not be said. The man who is right here is right fundamentally. The Union, so far as I

humanly drawn creed. Everybody knows, first, how difficult it is to draw up a creed; and second, how easy it is to sign it and then throw it over the shoulder or explain it away. The Thirty-Nine Articles do not keep men right; and the Church of Scotland went into Socinianism notwithstanding the Westminster Standards. My objection to a humanly-drawn creed however goes much deeper, and rests on my discipleship. I cannot allow any document to come between me and Scripture, any more than I can allow a priest to come between, and bring me, a report of what the mind of Christ is. I believe our forefathers were right when they avoided creed-making. The absence of a humanly drawn creed from the Constitution of the Union, so far from indicating laxity of belief, or indifference to truth, was designed to leave the road clear for direct appeal to the word of God who liveth and abideth forever on all questions of Christian faith and practice, to secure legitimate freedom to all, and to remove as far as possible every hindrance to a deeper searching into the mind of Christ under the personal guide of the Holy Spirit, which is our true safeguard against error and security of cert—

I do very earnestly hope that you may see your way to give ...

[incomplete/unsent]

¹³(Letter One) Culross to Spurgeon, November 22, 1887 (Spurgeon's College).

¹⁴This slip was a resolution that Aldis, MacClaren and Angus (all conservative past-presidents) proposed to put to the Council regarding Spurgeon's resignation. A draft of Culross's edited edition is held at Bristol (BBCA 14717). Here regret at the decision and appreciation of Spurgeon's ministry is intermingled in the introduction. They lament that Spurgeon did not bring these matters directly to the Council's attention. In their estimation there was no body in the land to 'be found more faithful' than the BU. They believed that the absence of a creed did not equate to laxity but the liberty to appeal directly to Scripture. Yet, the two ordinances themselves were sufficient to convey an evangelical position. If someone denied these they should seek 'fellowship elsewhere.' The final Council resolution, which bears only a remote likeness to the draft of the slip (BBCA 14717), can be found at the Angus, Baptist Union [typed] Council Minutes, no. 60, 13 December 1887.

know, has always required this, and has never required more, as the bond of enabling the churches to pull the same plough. If any one has renounced the profession involved in the two ordinances he certainly has no legitimate place in the Union, and as an honest man should seek fellowship elsewhere.

Beyond what is contained in the enclosed slip there are some things I should like to say, writing directly to yourself; and I am not going to dishonour you by apologizing for straight speech.

I do not know what private and personal dealings you have had with erring brethren, and with what result. That of course ought not to be blazed abroad. But I judge from your Articles that for some time you have known a hundred times more than I about individual cases. I speak of course in the dark; but I would have expected a righteous issue, probably this, 'Thou hast gained thy brother.' I cannot think that Christian men would have resented such a course.

I can see the necessity of carefully sifting reports, and hearing both sides, from what—has happened with myself. I am reported in letters and newspapers, and people believe it, to have written an address for Sheffield on the 'Down Grade,' apologizing for somebody or other, when in point of fact (as I stated publicly) the address had been put together long previously, from a special stand-point; I lying ill in bed and unable even to revise proof at the time when your pamphlet reached me. In my case, having a good conscience void of offence, it is a small matter to be judged of man's judgement: but, looking through my own experience I see how necessary it is that any man against whom a grave charge lies should have the opportunities of answering for himself.

I have long been alive to the dangers of the age, especially for our younger men, and have been earnestly endeavouring to counteract them, not without success in various cases; but, in judging as fairly as I can from the facts known to me in my own circle, I am bound to say that, in no body of the same magnitude in the land, will there be found more faithfulness to our Divine Saviour and Lord than is found, by God's grace, among our ministers. And I look round on true-hearted men (mediocre in point of intellect perhaps) labouring for Christ with heroic patience, in obscure places, in the face of immense discouragements, against whom (I am told) your articles are already being mercilessly used, in ways that you never intended or dreamed of.

I think the important thing is to bring men up face to face with their 'sacramental' profession. Trials for heresy seldom if ever check tendencies. When the winds are blowing from every quarter, I do not believe that we are to be kept right by a humanly-drawn creed. Everybody knows, first, how difficult it is to draw up a creed; and second, how easy it is to sign it and then throw it over the shoulder. The Thirty-Nine Articles are not a success; and the Church of Scotland went into gross Socinianism notwithstanding the Westminster Standards. A metropolitan man who is going to leave the Union unless a creed is adopted, says that he 'would have nothing beyond the Divinity of Christ, the Atonement, and the authority of Christ in and over the Church': we have all that, and more, already embodied in the two ordinances. My objection to a humanly-drawn creed rests on my discipleship. I cannot allow any document to come between me

¹⁵The BU's Declaration of Principle, adopted in 1873, gave the ordinance of baptism a central place in its brief doctrinal basis. The history behind this will be discussed in article two.

and Scripture, any more than I can allow a priest to come between, who shall report to me what the mind of Christ is. I believe our forefathers were right when they avoided creed-making. The absence of a humanly-drawn creed from the Constitution of the Union, so far from indicating laxity of belief, or indifference to truth, was designed to leave the road clear for direct appeal to the Scripture on all questions of Christian faith and practice, to secure legitimate freedom, and to remove as far as possible every hindrance to a deeper searching into the mind of Christ under the personal guide of the Holy Spirit.

What am I driving at? Frankly, I am driving at this, that your right place is in the Union, where your influence would under God be an immense power for good. I am not impudent enough to write, Can you not re-consider? Can you confer with a view to re-consideration? But that is what my heart says.

I trust you are regaining strength fast. With ancient regard yours James Culross

In the initiatory letter, which Culross had come to write amidst much turmoil, he referred to the slip, which was being prepared in response to Spurgeon's withdrawal. While grateful for Spurgeon's services he wanted to 'lay more emphasis' on the sufficiency of the ordinances as a profession of discipleship. 'How far reaching and deep is the doctrine of the two ordinances,' Culross wrote. He was unapologetic in his 'straight speech' to Spurgeon, not only in sharing this view, but in taking issue with Spurgeon for failing to follow Mt 18:15–20 to win his brothers and instead 'blaz[ing] abroad' matters that should have first been privately handled. As an example of how cautious one must be in judging he referred to the way his own BU address at Sheffield had been wrongly interpreted. Culross acknowledged the theological dangers of their time but felt Spurgeon's action was more harmful than helpful and that the BU still contained the greatest faithfulness among its ministers. After wading through historic examples as what he perceived as the difficulties of creed making, he centred his opposing view on discipleship, not wishing a creed to come between him and his Lord. Ultimately, feeling he had sufficiently showed how the ordinances provided a doctrinal basis, Culross appealed to Spurgeon that his 'right place' was 'in the Union.'

LETTER TWO: Spurgeon to Culross, November 26, 1887¹⁶ (Bristol)

Within six days Culross's letter had reached Spurgeon on holiday in France, some 708 miles away, and Spurgeon did not hesitate to reply:

Menton. 26 Nov. 87.

My Dear Dr Culross,

I think it most kind of you to write me. Four brethren have usually fired at me through the newspapers their loving appeals, and advices. Of this I do not complain; but assuredly yours is a way which commands an answer. Letters to the papers are literature, and may or may not be worth one's notice; yours is a letter sent to me, and I will at least heartily thank you for it.

¹⁶(Letter two) Spurgeon to Culross, November 26, 1887 (BBCA 14720).

Do I need to say that with you and such brethren as Dr Maclaren, Mr Aldis, and Dr Angus, I have no sort of disagreement, except that you stay in the Union, and I am out of it! We shall, according to our light, labour for the same cause. We are all Christians and Baptists, and can find many ways of cooperation.

The 'Metropolitan men' in London request the Union to devise some way by which I with others can return to the Union. This is very right from their point of view, but I wish you to understand as President of the Union that the request is not mine. I do not ask you to do what I am sure you cannot do. If I had thought you could have anything that would enable me to return if I retired, I should have asked you to do it before retiring.

So long as an association without a creed has no aliens in it, nobody can wish for a creed formally, for the spirit is there; but at a time when 'strange children' have entered, what is to be done? Whatever may theoretically be in your power, you practically have no power whatever. You will go on as you are, and unless God's grace calls back the wanderers, their number will increase, and their courage will cause them to speak out more plainly, and the sorrow of the faithful ones who shielded them in patient hope of better things.

I have followed out our Lord's mind as to private remonstrance by seeing presidents and secretary on former occasions, and I have written my remonstrances again and again without avail. I had no course but to withdraw.

Surely no sane person thinks that I should have made a tour to deal with the individual errorists. I have no jurisdiction over them, and should have been regarded as offensively intrusive if I had gone at them and justly so. My question is with the Union, and with that alone. I have dealt with it all along.

Your very clear declaration, that the Union could not have a creed, or as I read it, could not declare its doctrinal views otherwise than by practising baptism and the Lord's Supper, closes the door finally against me. Neither do I knock at that door, nor wish for another door to be made.

The good men who formed the Union, I fancy, had no idea that it would become what it now is, or they would have fashioned it otherwise. It has by its centralization and absorbing of various societies, become far other than at the first. This is a good thing, but it involves a strain on the frail fabric which it is ill adapted to bear. So I think; but time will be the best proof of that.

I wish I could have worked with you in this particular way; but as I cannot, we are not therefore deprived of a thousand other ways of fellowship. You feel union of heart with men who publicly preach Universal Restitution: I do not. I mean you feel enough fellowship to remain in the Union with them: I do not. The same with other errors. Still, I am in fellowship with you—Union or no Union. If I think you wrong in your course, as I surely do, I will tell you so in the same spirit, as that in which you have written to me.

From the Council of the Union I cannot look for anything which I should care to consider as the voice of the Union. It is too largely committed to a latitudinarian policy beforehand, and I have no question to refer to it. I am happily free from all responsibility for its actions, and all allegiance to its sovereignty.

Very heartily yours

C.H. Spurgeon

Spurgeon was appreciative that Culross chose to write to him directly and candidly, rather than indirectly through the press, and though he thought him wrong in his course, he told him so 'in the same Spirit, as that in which you have written to me.' Regardless of such straight speech and that Culross was in the BU and Spurgeon out of it, Spurgeon affirmed 'I am in fellowship with you,' along with many other affectionate references throughout. Yet as he affirmed his fellowship with the BU's more conservative leaders he disagreed with their policy of remaining. Spurgeon made it known that he did not request the 'Metropolitan men' to devise a way for his return to the BU. Spurgeon wanted it to be clear, 'I do not ask you to do what I am sure you cannot do.' In theory Culross and the Council may have had the ability to effect the changes Spurgeon desired, but in practice and power he believed they could not, or Spurgeon would not have left. To Spurgeon, a creed was the most expedient way to separate the 'aliens' from the 'faithful ones.'

To the charge of not abiding by Mt 18:15–20 Spurgeon clarified that while he had not made any formal public statements by way of the Council he had remonstrated with privately to Presidents and Secretaries. As to the charge of not singling out individuals, Spurgeon did not believe any sane person would have seen this route as respectable. As a union of churches Spurgeon's concern was with the BU and not the individuals. To reduce theological declarations to the ordinances, he felt, subjectively compromised the truth and would allow the 'wanderers' to increase under 'the hope of better things.' Thus, Culross's statement that the BU could have no creed meant to Spurgeon that the very basis of fellowship, Christian truth, was compromised and thus the door was shut against him. Elsewhere he likened the BU to a house without a foundation. Had he deemed the foundation in good enough repair he would have seen the wisdom of repairing the structure, or fabric; but as it stood, he believed the BU needed reconstructing, otherwise 'coming out' from an association that held 'questionable doctrines' was the only option that did not violate his conscience.¹⁷ This is why Spurgeon could declare, 'I am happily free from all responsibility for its [BU] actions, and all allegiance to its sovereignty.' Spurgeon believed that the Council had become so committed to a 'latitudinarian policy'—keeping the peace so as to preserve its denominational organs—and less interested in truth that he had lost faith in its capacity to lead or be the representative voice of the BU.

LETTER THREE: Culross to Spurgeon, December 2, 1887 (Spurgeon's)¹⁸

¹⁷*The Sword and The Trowel* (1888), 82–3; and (1889), 389–90. Quoted in Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, 161.

¹⁸(Letter three) Culross to Spurgeon, December 2, 1887 (Spurgeon's College). This is a well cited letter as it appears in *Autobiography of C.H. Spurgeon*, vol. IV, 262. A Draft of Letter Three is held at Bristol (Culross to Spurgeon, December 2, 1887 [BBCA 14717]):

Immediately upon reception of Spurgeon's letter, Culross sent a reply; haste that underscores the urgency of this communication, both personally and denominationally:

Private

Bristol—2 Dec. 1887

My Dear Mr. Spurgeon,

Will you receive my very sincere thanks for your letter? Reading it, I think you partly misunderstand me, as no doubt I in turn misunderstand you. Were Mentone within two hundred miles, I would certainly find my way to it; and two frank hours would do a great deal to make the whole relative position plain.

There is only one thing in your letter to which I am anxious just now to refer—but it is special. You write: —'Your very clear declaration that the Union could not have a creed, or as I read it, could not declare its doctrinal views otherwise than by practising baptism and the Lord's supper closes the door finally against me.' On the contrary (without entering on the general question of creed-subscription) my contention is that the Baptist Union has already declared itself on such fundamental questions as the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)—the unity of God—the death, resurrection, sovereign authority, and abiding presence with us of the Lord Jesus, —the avail of His atoning death—the forgiveness of sins—faith in Him as the 'condition' (for want of a better word) of salvation, while unbelief infers the Divine condemnation. I do not think that the wisest creed-maker could express the mind of Christ better than He Himself has done already for honest men. For it is not simply that we practise two rites—but we accept the truth which Christ so explicitly declares to lie in them. I do not see how it is possible to evade the force of His words; and if any man succeeds in doing so, he would slip through the meshes of any creed that

Private

Bristol 2 Dec 1887

My Dear Mr. Spurgeon,

Will you receive my very sincere thanks for your letter? Reading it I think you partly misunderstand me, as no doubt I in turn misunderstand you. Were Mentone within two hundred miles' distance I would certainly find my way to see you—and two hours would do a great deal to make the whole relative position clear.

There is only one thing in your letter to which I am anxious just now to refer—but it is special. You write: 'Your very declaration that the Union could not have a creed, or as I read it, could not declare its doctrinal views otherwise than by practising baptism and the Lord's supper closes the door finally against me.' On the contrary (without entering into the general question of creed-subscription) my contention is that the Baptist Union has already declared itself on such fundamental questions as the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,)—the unity of God—the death, resurrection, sovereign authority, and abiding presence with us of the Lord Jesus, —the avail [vicariousness] of His atoning death—the forgiveness of sins—faith in Him as the 'condition' (for want of a better word) of salvation, while unbelief infers the Divine Condemnation. I do not think that the wisest creed-maker could express the mind of Christ better than He Himself has done already for honest men. For it is not two rites that we believe in—but what Christ declares in distinct words to be the meaning of these rites. I do not see how it is possible to evade the force of His words; and if any man succeeds in doing so, he would slip through the meshes of any creed that could be constructed. Many years ago I gave an address in Stirling (from which I plagiarized when writing you last week) on the sufficient basis for co-operation in Christian work. I have sent my rough notes—in their rough state—to the Baptist and Freeman. That address was a 'declaration'—not of all Christian truth of course—but of fundamental truths which Christ has been pleased to embody for us in the two ordinances. Such a 'declaration' I hold myself perfectly free to make—and I have made it—on the same principle on which I preach God's word. The Union is equally free. Suppose I could sate in proper language what truths are in the words of Christ, there is nothing whatever to prevent the Union affirming in the face of the whole world, these are truths which we not only believe, but which we hold to lie as the basis of Church organization and personal life. Every member of our churches is already fully committed to them in virtue of his membership; and if he denies them, he has no legitimate place in our ranks.

[unended/unsent]

could be constructed. Many years ago I gave an address in Stirling (from which I plagiarized when writing you last week) on the sufficient basis for co-operation in Christian work. I have sent my rough notes—in their rough state—to the Baptist and Freeman.¹⁹ That address was a ‘declaration’—not of all Christian truth of course, but of fundamental truths which Christ has been pleased to embody for us and explain to us in baptism and the supper. Such a ‘declaration’ of my faith I hold myself perfectly free to make; and I have made it, —on the same principle on which I preach God’s word. The Union is equally free. There is nothing whatever, so far as I can see, to prevent the Union from doing the same thing and affirming in the face of the whole world, these are truths which Christ has proclaimed to lie as the basis of Church organization and personal life. I hold that every member of our churches is already fully committed to them in virtue of his membership; and if he denies them, he has no legitimate place in our ranks.

It seems strange to me to be in apparent antagonism to you—when I know that—in my profoundest conviction I am nearer you than you imagine. May God over rule all we do for His glory, and for the helping of men. My heart is very sad. If it would be of any use I would willingly lie down under my bit of green turf. The only peace I have is in committing everything to God, with the prayer that He would undertake and manage.

I cannot keep sending you my sincere love. Yours as gold

James Culross

Culross saw this lamentable matter as a great misunderstanding, something closer proximity would resolve with a two-hour visit. However, because of the distance he sought to clarify his belief that the ordinances were a form of creed already (though he was anti-credal), and stood perplexed how this expression of truth had shut the door to Spurgeon. He likewise openly stated that anyone who believed contrary to what was represented in them had no place in the BU. Foreshadowing what would occur, he said the BU was free to declare openly what it did believe. The grief of the conflict and his love for Spurgeon are deeply evident, particularly in the final paragraph and signature line. Holding so much in common, Culross failed to grasp the very different currents that were operative in their thinking.

LETTER FOUR: Spurgeon to Culross, December 5, 1887²⁰ (Bristol)

The last known written word between the two men is in Spurgeon’s reply, just three days later (which really does speak volumes about the effectiveness of European postal reforms and technological advances during this period):

(Suffering greatly from neuralgia²¹ through the wet season)

¹⁹*The Baptist* and *The Freeman* represent two Baptist newspapers referenced in this article. *The Baptist* was a private venture which was often critical of the BU. It was started in 1872 and bought in 1910 and amalgamated with *The Baptist Times*. *The Freeman* was more favourably disposed to the BU.

²⁰(Letter Four) Spurgeon to Culross, December 5, 1887 (BBCA 14720).

²¹A severe pain caused by irritation or damage to a nerve.

Menton. Dec 5. 87.

My Dear Friend,

If you can persuade your constituency that all who deny the great evangelical truths ought to quit the Baptist Union because these truths are implied in Baptism and the Lord's Supper, I shall not raise the slightest objection. I shall rejoice in your success.

If this question were to be tried in a Court of Law, no Judge would regard the pleadings as being more than devout sentiment.

Will you, however, carry out your theory? I am indifferent as to method so long as the Union maintains evangelical truth. If a case is mentioned, in which a minister distinctly repudiates evangelical doctrine, will you exercise discipline on the ground that he belies his Baptism and the Supper? I am persuaded that the Council will not hear of it.

You, and other beloved brethren, mean liberty within evangelical lines, but this is not what is now claimed, neither is it that which your constitution affords. I am not going into the delicacies of theory, but into matters of actual fact.

If you have any power of reform, use it; use it in any one case, or in any one form. Declare that the Baptist Union is a confederacy of evangelical churches, and that it holds the truths commonly known as evangelical and that persons who do not hold these truths are not rightly in the Union.

I say it very sorrowfully, I do not believe that you could pass any such resolution.

Let me add that I believe you and I are of one heart and soul. I have always rejoiced to learn of you. In this matter I do not feel in the least divided from you by the fact that you are in a certain society, and I am not. I do not think you are wilfully in fellowship with error, but I fear you are sheltering error beneath your wing without being aware of it.

The Independency of the churches seems to me to be a gracious safeguard from corporate blundering.

Yours in the one Body,

C.H. Spurgeon

Spurgeon replied to his friend unconvinced of his arguments unless they be practically tried. Unconcerned with the method, be it a creed or the ordinances, Spurgeon was interested in the maintenance of evangelical truth. As such, he challenged Culross to carry out the theory through disciplinary action. Sorrowfully, he did not believe it was possible, nor that Culross's ordinance theory would be vindicated if tried in a court of law. Spurgeon believed the Declaration of Principle insufficient to reckon with the theological trends of the day, but not only that, he questioned the determination of the BU leadership to preserve the doctrinal purity of the Union. These were tough words and so he reassured Culross of his belief that they were 'one heart and one soul' (c.f. Acts 4:32), cautioning him not to shelter error unknowingly. Baptist independency was the last

bulwark against 'corporate blunderings.' Herein are encouraging words intermingled with straight speech. Following Spurgeon's letter there is no known correspondence between them, at least which has survived, though they did meet on 13 January 1888 when a BU deputation visited him to discuss the Downgrade. The tension of the circumstances surrounding this meeting, and Spurgeon's death four years later may make this their final correspondence.

Conclusion

The hitherto neglected Culross-Spurgeon relationship found in these four letters is a helpful window to understand the divergent views on confessionalism that were present in the BU during the Downgrade. Throughout the correspondence their mutual esteem is evident. However, as it progresses the source of their divergence crystallizes as the conversation sharpens. Not only did they see the outworking of Mt 18:15–20 very differently, their view of the efficacy of creeds to address the theological challenges of the day placed them irreconcilably on differing sides of confessionalism. In letter one Culross argued that the ordinances were a sufficient statement of belief, challenged Spurgeon for not following Mt 18 and called him back into the BU. In letter two Spurgeon believed the Council to be so latitudarian as to be unwilling to affect the use of the ordinances as a doctrinal test, and inadequate even if they would; he also questioned the viability of a union without a basis for agreement. He ended by protesting that he had followed Mt 18:15–20. In letter three Culross, believing this was all a misunderstanding, sought to clarify what he meant about the ordinances, insisting that those who believed otherwise had no place in the BU, and stood perplexed why his view had shut the door against Spurgeon's return. In the final and fourth letter Spurgeon reiterated his belief that the Council was powerless in their will and ability to use the Declaration of Principle to safeguard the denomination from theological downgrade and challenged Culross to prove him wrong. It is evident the strain on their friendship and the differences in their views made this a painful correspondence, in spite of their mutual assurances of fellowship. Thus, their friendship is a microcosm of what was a complex and emotive controversy amongst the wider Baptist family.

In the second article, it will be demonstrated that the crisis of confessionalism apparent in their friendship and correspondence arose in how they how they responded to theological and cultural trends (i.e. liberalism and Romanticism) in late nineteenth-century Victorian Britain. The second article will first provide introductory biographies for Culross and Spurgeon; sketch the nature of their friendship; chart the process of Baptist deconfessionalisation; provide a brief contextual summary of the cultural trends that were operative at the time of the Downgrade; integrate an examination of their friendship within the basic details of the controversy itself; and finally conclude with a critical

reflection of issues that were operative during the Downgrade as seen through this friendship, ending with an epilogue.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributors

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