

The Down Grade (April, 1887)

by C.H. Spurgeon

The Down Grade refers to a period of decline in Nonconformist churches, characterized by a lack of faith, corruption, and death, and marked by the spread of heresies such as Pelagianism, Arminianism, and Arianism.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:3

Topics: "The Authority of Scripture", "The Danger of Heresy"

Description

C.H. Spurgeon addresses the decline of true faith among Nonconformists from 1688 to the reign of George III, highlighting a period marked by theological corruption and the rise of heresies such as Arminianism and Socinianism. He emphasizes the importance of holding fast to the authority of Scripture, warning against the dangers of questioning its divine inspiration, which leads to spiritual decay. Spurgeon notes that while some churches succumbed to heresy, others experienced revival through faithful ministers who restored the gospel's truth. He calls for vigilance against modern skepticism and urges believers to remain steadfast in their faith. Ultimately, Spurgeon encourages the church to uphold the Word of God as the guiding truth amidst a culture of doubt.

Transcript

THE period from 1688, when William III. began his reign, to the time of the commencement of the long reign of George III., has been described as "a quiet time" among Nonconformists. It was so in more senses than one. There was a cessation of open and organized persecution. The Laudian spirit still lived, but it did not reign. The battle between Conformists and Nonconformists was no longer as it had been, one of the sword and of force, but rather of the pen, and by means of that quiet, subtle influence which abettors of State churches know so well how to wield.

It was quiet, too, in the sense that there were few instances of lively faith, earnest zeal, and whole-souled devotedness in the cause of the gospel. To a large extent, and with some notable and happy exceptions, it was the quiet of corruption and death. The profligacy of Charles II., and the perfidy of James II., had told upon the Court, upon the nobility, upon pulpit and press, and upon society generally. True religion languished; and, but for a small remnant of earnest and faithful men, the decay and death would have been complete.

It was a fitting time for the propagation of the Pelagian and Socinian heresies. Arminianism, which is only Pelagianism under another name, had, to a large extent, eaten out the life of the Church of England, and Arianism followed to further and complete the destruction. As if to show how powerless in themselves are

the best defined articles of faith, the first open advocates of Arianism were clergymen of the Established Church. Dr. William Whiston, Professor of Mathematics in the University of Cambridge, and Dr.

Samuel Clarke, Rector of St. James's, Westminster, were the captains in this unholy war with truth. Many of the clergy, and a few among the laity, embraced their sentiments. The majority of professed adherents to the State Church were too indifferent to religion to trouble themselves about the matter. But it was otherwise among Nonconformists. Many of the hearers were not much, if at all, behind their ministers in intelligence and interest in theological matters; and where this was the case, the bungling theories of Whiston and Clarke were readily embraced as agreeable to their taste and flattering to their reason.

James Pierce, a Presbyterian minister, first at Cambridge, then at Newbury, and afterwards at Exeter, wrought incalculable mischief. He was a man who, for learning, eloquence, and other natural and acquired abilities, held a high place in the esteem of the congregations to which he ministered. So much the more subtle and powerful was the influence of his teaching, and so much the more disastrous were the results. Among the Independents the leaven worked. In the colleges, or academies, as they were then called, the mischief first came to a head.

Doctor Doddridge was as sound as he was amiable; but perhaps he was not always judicious; or more probably still, he was too judicious, and not sufficiently bold and decided. As the pastor of an influential church, and as the head of an academy which ranked higher than any other, his amiable disposition permitted him to do what men made of sterner stuff would not have done. He sometimes mingled in a fraternal manner, even exchanging pulpits, with men whose orthodoxy was called in question.

It had its effect on many of the younger men, and served to lessen in the estimate of the people generally the growing, divergence of sentiment. No one, however, could, and certainly the present writer will not, insinuate even the suspicion of heresy against the author of

"Jesus, I love thy charming name."

Dr. Doddridge was succeeded by Dr. Ashworth, of Daventry. He was recommended to the Independent church at Northampton as his successor in the pastorate, as well as in the academy, in Dr. Doddridge's will. But Dr. Ashworth elected to remain at Daventry, and the Academy was removed thither. Great abilities, much learning, consummate prudence, unaffected modesty, with great devotion and diligence in his tutorial duties, are the outlines of his character as drawn by the historian.

He was a Calvinist of the moderate order, and we should be disposed to put a strong emphasis on the "moderate." So, at least, it is fair to infer from the testimony of one of his pupils, Dr. Joseph Priestley, the great champion of Socinianism among Nonconformists. He says:--"In my time the academy was in a state peculiarly favorable to the serious pursuit of truth, as the students were about equally divided upon every question of much importance, such as liberty, necessity, the sleep of the soul, and all the articles of theological orthodoxy and heresy; in consequence of which, all these topics were the subject of continual discussion.

Our tutors, also, were of different opinions, Dr. Ashworth taking the orthodox side of every question, and Mr. Clark, the sub-tutor, that of heresy, though always with the greatest modesty. Both of our tutors being young, at least as tutors, and some of the senior students excelling more than they could pretend to do in several branches of study, they indulged us in the greatest freedoms. The general plan of our studies, which may be seen in Dr. Doddridge's published lectures, was exceedingly favorable to free enquiry, as

we were referred to authors on both sides of every question.

In this situation I saw reason to embrace what is generally called the heterodox side of every question." The subsequent history of the famous academy, founded and supported by Mr. Coward, and afterwards endowed by him, "with the express condition that the students shall be educated in the principles of the Assembly's Catechism," illustrates the folly and the virtual unfaithfulness of the course adopted by the professors. Mr. Robins was Dr. Ashworth's successor as pastor and tutor, and he was reputed as sound in the faith.

His assistant tutor, however, was Thomas Belsham, who afterwards succeeded him in the theological chair. Belsham was a fellow-student of Priestley, and became an avowed opponent of Calvinism, and the open advocate of Socinianism. He had the honesty to resign his tutorship. But the mischief had been done. When the enemy had sowed tares among the wheat, "he went his way." The seed could not easily be dislodged. Mr. Horsey, his successor, could have been little better, for "most of the pupils were found to be Socinians."

He had to resign, as not faithfully executing the will of the founder, and the Academy was dissolved. This was the application to an institution thoroughly infected with theological leprosy of the wise law--wise in both a sanitary and spiritual sense--which God gave of old. The house had been scraped, and patched, and repaired, but the leprosy increased. "And, behold, if the plague be spread in the house it is a fretting leprosy in the house: it is unclean. And he shall break down the house, the stones of it, and the timber thereof, and all the mortar of the house; and he shall carry them forth out of the city into an unclean place."

As the fish decays first at the head, and as the old, old proverb is still commonly true, "Like priest like people," so little good can be expected of such ministers, and little hoped for of the hearers who approve their sentiments. Surely there was need enough of Whitefield and the other great preachers connected with the evangelical revival. That revival came not a day too soon, for the churches in general were indeed "low in a low place." The Independent churches, though many of them were grievously tainted with heresy, did not remain corrupt.

A race of earnest and faithful ministers were raised up who built again that which had been thrown down, leaving their mark on the age and their example to their successors. Do the present race of men prove themselves worthy successors of their fathers? Some do, no doubt. Would that the same could be said of all! But in too many cases sceptical daring seems to have taken the place of evangelical zeal, and the husks of theological speculations are preferred to the wholesome bread of gospel truth.

With some the endeavor seems to be not how steadily and faithfully they can walk in the truth, but how far they can get from it. To them divine truth is like a lion or a tiger, and they give it "a wide berth." Our counsel is--Do not go too near the precipice; you may slip or fall over. Keep where the ground is firm; do not venture on the rotten ice. Take the advice of an old missionary, the late Thomas Morgan, of Howrah. The writer, and a worthy brother who fell asleep twenty years ago, were all journeying in the direction of Maidstone, where the missionary was to meet the late Mr.

Dobney. Said one of us to him, "How about Mr. D.'s theory concerning future punishment?" The old Welshman replied, "Well, if he brings up the subject to me, I shall say, 'Don't try it, that's all.'" So we venture to say to any venturesome spirit who wants to follow the Will-with- a-wisp of modern thought, "Don't try it; there are dangerous bogs near, where you may soon lose yourself and all that is dear to you." If anyone wishes to know where the tadpole of Darwinism was hatched, we could point him to the pew of

the old chapel in High Street, Shrewsbury, where Mr.

Darwin, his father, and we believe his father's father, received their religious training. The chapel was built for Mr. Talents, an ejected minister; but for very many years full-blown Socinianism has been taught there, as also in the old chapel at Chester, where Matthew Henry used to minister, and where a copy of his Commentary, of the original edition, is kept for public use, the only witness, we fear, to the truths he taught there. It is of less importance, but still worthy of note, that the property with which the old High Street church at Shrewsbury was endowed, producing now from £300 to £400 per annum, has long been appropriated to uphold Socinian teaching.

The General Baptists have yet to be noticed. And here we must draw a line hard and sharp between the Old Connexion and the New Connexion. The latter was formed in 1770, and was the result of the heterodoxy of the former. The Old Connexion generally became Arianized, and, with hardly an exception, followed on "the down grade" to Socinianism. A writer of acknowledged repute, writing at the early part of the present century, makes this rather startling statement:-- "Arminianism among the dissenters has, in general, been a cold, dry, and lifeless system, and its effects upon the heart have been commonly weak and spiritless.

With the General Baptists, who avowed it to be their creed, this was remarkably the effect, and their congregations did not increase. Besides, from facts too stubborn to be bent, and too numerous to be contradicted, Arminianism has been among them the common road to Arianism and Socinianism. Their ministers and congregations were the first who openly professed these opinions; and their societies have felt the decay which these opinions have uniformly produced." The writer can point to several places in the county of Kent where General Baptist congregations of the Old Connexion existed, and he can describe their present condition.

That at Dover has been for many years Socinian, and, perhaps, it is one of the most vigorous in the county, though the chapel is small and the attendance few. That at Deal is Socinian likewise, if we can describe it as being anything, when the place is open for one service only in three weeks. That at Wingham has been closed very many years. That in the large and wealthy parish of Yalding, has been closed for half a century. The writer often visited and preached in this old, stable-like building thirty years ago, the place being lent for the purpose; but of all dead places, that was the most dead.

Spiritually, it was like the face of the country around Dowlais Top--not a vestige of herb, or grass, or any living thing to be seen. The old church at Eythorne was for nearly two hundred and fifty years General Baptist, belonging first to the Old Connexion, and then to the New. About a hundred years ago the pastor and congregation became Calvinistic, and joined the Particular Baptist body. Strange to say, but the fact is so, that from that time it began to develop and increase in numbers, spiritual power, and social position.

And now it can be said with truth, that there are very few churches in Great Britain whose career, during the past hundred years, has been equally remarkable. From the church in this village of less than six hundred inhabitants swarms have been sent out to Dover, Canterbury, and Deal, while its members or their descendants have been instruments in planting, or have helped to found, churches in Folkestone, in Ramsgate, Margate, and other places in the Isle of Thanet. In the General Baptist Church at Bessels Green, near Sevenoaks, there was a long, and fierce, and painful struggle between Socinianism and evangelical orthodoxy, the latter at last prevailing.

These last two cases illustrate the "up grade," rather than the "down grade," and they will bring out the latter in bolder relief. Narrowness of space and abundance of facts have burdened and hampered us in these sketches, and we can only add a few hints as to the cause or causes of the sad decay in piety and principle which it has been our painful duty to narrate. In the case of every errant course there is always a first wrong step. If we can trace that wrong step, we may be able to avoid it and its results.

Where, then, is the point of divergence from the "King's highway of truth"? What is the first step astray? Is it doubting this doctrine, or questioning that sentiment, or being sceptical as to the other article of orthodox belief? We think not. These doubts and this scepticism are the outcome of something going before. If a mariner, having to traverse an unknown sea, does not put implicit confidence in his charts, and therefore does not consult them for guidance in steering the ship, he is, as anyone can see, every moment exposed to dangers of various kinds.

Now, the Word of God--the Book written by holy men as they were moved by the Spirit of God--is the Christian's chart; and though, in a ship's company, some of the men may have little critical knowledge of navigation, the captain is supposed to be well instructed therein, and to be able, by consulting the charts, to steer the ship aright; so in reference to ministers of Christ's gospel, and pastors of Christ's church, which he hath purchased with his blood. The first step astray is a want of adequate faith in the divine inspiration of the sacred Scriptures.

All the while a man bows to the authority of God's Word, he will not entertain any sentiment contrary to its teaching. "To the law and to the testimony," is his appeal concerning every doctrine. He esteems that holy Book, concerning all things, to be right, and therefore he hates every false way. But let a man question, or entertain low views of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and he is without chart to guide him, and without anchor to hold him. In looking carefully over the history of the times, and the movement of the times, of which we have written briefly, this fact is apparent: that where ministers and Christian churches have held fast to the truth that the Holy Scriptures have been given by God as an authoritative and infallible rule of faith and practice, they have never wandered very seriously out of the right way.

But when, on the other hand, reason has been exalted above revelation, and made the exponent of revelation, all kinds of errors and mischiefs have been the result. If this be a fact--and who can disprove it?--then we live in dangerous times, and there is great peril very near all those, whoever they may be, who call in question the inspiration--the divine inspiration--of the Word of God. "O earth, earth, earth! hear the word of the Lord." The writer is of opinion that the great majority of those who are sound in the doctrine of inspiration, are more or less Calvinistic in doctrine; and that the more the oracles of divine truth are humbly and prayerfully studied, the more closely the student's views will coincide with evangelical truth.

That he is not alone in his opinion will be seen from the following:-- "Veneration for the sacred Scriptures may certainly be considered as a test of the general purity of religious sentiments. Whether any will be found to equal Calvinists in this respect, shall be left to the judgment; of those readers who have made extensive observations on the subject. Perhaps it cannot be contradicted that, in proportion as any sect recedes from Calvinism, their veneration for the Scriptures is diminished The Bible is the Calvinist's creed.

Whatever God has spoken, he feels himself bound to receive and believe, however mysterious the doctrine may be. Arminians, in general, will not be found to be equal to them in this respect, and many of that creed lay down their ideas of the moral perfections of the Deity as the foundation, and explain every part of Scripture in consonance with them, though, in order to accomplish this, no small degree of force

must be employed. The Arian venerates the Scriptures still less than the Arminian; his ideas of inspiration are lower; his canons of criticism less honorable to the sacred writers; human reason is exalted to a higher office, and what is not comprehensible by its grasp, is not readily received.

The mind of the Socinian feels still less veneration for the Word of God; for, according to his sentiments, some parts of it are not inspired; mistakes occur in the reasoning of the apostles; not a few passages are unauthentic, and what remains is interpreted with a latitude as to the expressions and language of Scripture, which would not be tolerated in expounding the sense of any other writer." ("History of Dissenters," by Bogue and Bennet.) The Rev. Job Orton, one of Dr. Doddridge's students, and for a short time an assistant tutor with him at Northampton, was the minister of the united congregation of Presbyterians and Independents, meeting at High Street, Shrewsbury, from 1741 to 1765.

He was not considered fully orthodox, though many of his sentiments were sound and good. Many of his hearers suspected him of heresy concerning the Godhead of Christ, and when, in preaching those expositions of the Bible, which were afterwards published in six volumes, he came to Isaiah 9:6, "Unto us a son is born," etc., and they were listening with breathless attention as to what he would say on that part, "The mighty God," they were sadly disappointed when he passed the glorious declaration over by saying, "The mighty God.

The meaning of this I cannot tell; and how should I, when his name is called Wonderful?" It need be no matter of surprise that his successor at High Street was a Socinian, and that the orthodox part of his congregation founded the Independent church at Swan Hill, which retains, in all essential things, its primitive soundness. And yet Mr. Orton strongly recommended Philip Henry's statement of his religious belief, and has left on record, in his letters, remarks which are worthy to be pondered, as coming from a man whom Socinians regarded with favor.

"I have long since found," says he "(and every year that I live increases my conviction of it), that when ministers entertain their people with lively and pretty things, confine themselves to general harangues, insist principally on moral duties, without enforcing them warmly and affectionately by evangelical motives; while they neglect the peculiars of the gospel, never or seldom display the grace of God, and the love of Christ in our redemption; the necessity of regeneration and sanctification by a constant dependence on the Holy Spirit of God for assistance and strength in the duties of the Christian life, their congregations are in a wretched state; some are dwindling to nothing, as is the case with several in this neighborhood, where there are now not as many scores as there were hundreds in their meeting-places, fifty years ago.

But where, by trade and manufactures, new persons come to the place, and fill up the vacant seats, there is a fatal deadness spread over the congregation. They run in 'the course of this world,' follow every fashionable folly, and family and personal godliness seems in general to be lost among them. There is scarcely any appearance of life and zeal in the cause of religion, which demands and deserves the greatest. "Whereas, on the contrary, I never knew an instance where a minister was a pious, serious man, whose strain was evangelical and affectionate, but his congregation kept up, though death and removals had made many breaches in it.

"These letters were written when he had retired from the pastorate, residing at Kidderminster for the last eighteen years of his life." It would seem that Orton had seen the folly of "the down grade" course, and was anxious to bear his testimony, to deter others. But leaving men and their opinions, the Word of the Lord standeth fast for ever; and that Word to every one who undertakes to be God's messenger, and to

speaking the Lord's message to the people, is "He that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully.

What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord." The Lord help us all to be "steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as we know our labor shall not be in vain in the Lord."

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