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WILLIAM TYNDALE QUINCENTENARY 1994

Tyndale, who gave us our English Bible, in one of the great figures in English history. Executed for heresy, his words were nevertheless the basis of the King James Bible and have reached more people than even Shakespeare. 1994 is the quincentenary of his birth and there will be many celebrations of his achievements, particularly a service at St Paul's Cathedral on 6 October and an international conference on 'William Tyndale, the Bible and the Tudor World', at Oxford, 5-10 September. There the foundation will be laid for future work on Tyndale as translator, as religious writer and the founder of much that is taken for granted in our modern English language.

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THE DOWN GRADE CONTROVERSY

New Evidence

During preparations for the Baptist Union's recent move to Didcot a parcel of papers relating to the Down Grade Controversy emerged from the depths of a Baptist Church House safe. They are now held in the Angus Library at Regent's Park College. The collection includes notes and transcripts of Baptist Union Council meetings and some printed material, but the most important part is the Down Grade correspondence of Samuel Harris Booth, secretary of the Baptist Union at the time of the controversy. No existing account of the controversy shows any sign of knowledge of this collection, not even the work of Ernest Payne, a distinguished later occupant of Booth's chair.¹ The correspondence allows us a much more complete view than previously of the strategy - and the disagreements - that underlay the public campaign waged by the leaders of the Baptist Union. In the main it tends to confirm the understanding of the Down Grade controversy I expressed in an earlier article and in my thesis,² to which the present article should be considered a supplement. Reassessment is prompted mainly on the level of the contributions of individuals in the Union leadership, notably Samuel Harris Booth himself: he occupies a central position, not in the main as a forceful and decisive leader, but as the organizing hub of a collective leadership, very active and very sensitive, and completely dedicated to the defence of the Baptist Union.

Booth's Down Grade controversy started two months later than Charles Haddon Spurgeon's, with the announcement of Spurgeon's resignation from the Baptist Union on 26 October 1887 - the action Spurgeon had vainly hoped would allow him to retreat from the fray. Just three letters dealing with the controversy in the Baptist Union collection predate this event, and Booth's list of Down Grade correspondence contains only four entries for outgoing letters in this period. The one person to offer him a significant piece of written advice at an early stage was Thomas Stockwell, editor of *The Baptist*, a more conservative weekly than the semi-official *Freeman*, who told Booth that the Down Grade ought to be discussed at the Baptist Union's October meetings in Sheffield.³ But Booth deliberately kept the Down Grade off the agenda at Sheffield, hoping that Spurgeon would calm down.⁴ He miscalculated. Spurgeon felt snubbed by the official silence, and the additional smart caused by a number of uncomplimentary unofficial remarks and incidents sufficed to trigger his resignation.

Booth's reaction was to switch directly from inactivity to an intense activity that he sustained for the remaining six months of the controversy. He consulted his president and vice-president immediately.⁵ James Culross, the president, was principal of the Bristol College, and therefore put a lot of his thinking about the controversy into his letters to Booth. But John Clifford, the vice-president, was with Booth in London, and it is therefore much harder to build up a detailed

understanding of his contribution to the Baptist Union's position in the controversy - the collection contains little from him apart from the cryptic telegrams setting up meetings or answering questions.

However, the position of all these leaders is clear over the first major decision, what immediate response to make to Spurgeon's resignation. When Booth went down to Bristol to see him on 31 October, Culross took the same view as Clifford, as would usually be the case through the different twists of the controversy: they both thought that nothing would be gained by the Union taking any immediate initiative. But Booth was inclined to take a more active line and to involve more people in the consultations, and so argued in favour of the immediate summoning of Council. This initial exchange set the pattern for the months to come: Booth consistently urging an active strategy with broad consultation, and Culross and Clifford preferring greater calm and restricting the circle involved in decision-making. On this occasion they settled on a compromise, circularizing Council members asking them whether they desired an immediate Council meeting. Booth also gained permission to seek approval for this formula from Charles Williams, the most recent former president of the Union. Williams, who should be recognized as the 'fourth man' in the Union leadership in the controversy, shared Booth's predilection for summoning Council immediately.⁶

The decision against an immediate meeting of Council, reported in the press, was not very decisive: 44 against, 34 in favour, and 6 abstentions.⁷ There was no clear split on theological or 'party' lines: among those favouring a meeting were hard-line opponents wanting an official rebuff to be made to Spurgeon's charges as well as supporters of Spurgeon hoping Council might persuade him to withdraw his resignation; and on the victorious side were supporters of Spurgeon who thought Council incapable of any constructive action as well as people who shared Culross' and Clifford's view that it would be unseemly for the Union to be goaded into precipitate action by Spurgeon. The overriding factor influencing the negative vote appears to have been that few had any idea what a meeting of Council could achieve, which reflects the fact that the circular itself failed even to hint at an agenda for the proposed meeting.⁸

Booth did not let this setback reduce him to passivity. He was attracted by a suggestion of Horatio Wilkins of Cheltenham,⁹ that Culross and some other leading figures should meet unofficially and put the result of their meeting to Spurgeon. He lost no time in putting this idea to the sympathetic Williams, who gave him the expected endorsement. Williams thought that some good might be done by a statement of the officials and ex-presidents, or just the latter, mingling respect and love with reasoned regret at Spurgeon's action. Soon afterwards Williams began to take the initiative, sending Booth a draft letter to Spurgeon and asking him to help get the ex-presidents together. His unexpressed intention was to bypass Culross and Clifford, and he was annoyed when Booth brought them in on this initiative. Williams argued unconvincingly that the officials were bound to inactivity by the

Council vote against holding a special meeting, and that he had written to Booth as a friend, not as the Secretary of the Union.¹⁰

Williams' annoyance is understandable, for Culross, to whom Booth had made a second visit, firmly took the initiative into his own hands: the meeting became one of officers as well as ex-presidents, and the draft communication to Spurgeon to be considered was Culross', not Williams'.¹¹ Williams' next letter to Booth signals a burgeoning dispute between the leading Baptists of the north-west and Bristol. He sulkily threatened to boycott the forthcoming meeting (a threat he did not carry out), told Booth that Alexander McLaren¹² shared his view that the officials should not be involved and had written to Culross on the subject, and berated Booth more forcefully than before for showing his draft letter to Spurgeon to people in Bristol: 'That was not intended to be shown to Glover or to Bristol men. Glover is partly responsible for this mischief, and may lead you deeper into the mire. I sent my letter to you as a *friend*, not as a secretary.'¹³

Culross averted a possible split in the Union's leadership by travelling to Manchester to see Williams and McLaren on the weekend of 12-13 November. There they worked out a joint draft that respected the concern of the Lancashire axis not to include anything that could be construed as an attack on Spurgeon; they also agreed that the letter should be signed by McLaren, Joseph Angus and John Aldis of Plymouth, three Baptist fathers in good standing with Spurgeon, as well as by Culross himself.¹⁴ When it finally appeared in the religious press the letter barely caused a ripple on the surface of the controversy,¹⁵ but its importance lies not in its effect but in the fact that its preparation was the major preoccupation of the Union's leadership during a significant ten-day period soon after Spurgeon's resignation, and that in the course of this the main differences among the leaders first became apparent, especially that between the softer line favoured by Williams and McLaren in Manchester and the greater willingness to counterattack against Spurgeon shown by Culross and Richard Glover in Bristol. At a time when even such a moderate and conservative man as Angus was arguing that some rebuttal of Spurgeon's sweeping charges should be made,¹⁶ Williams was sharing with Booth the programme he would stand by influentially throughout the controversy:

The more I see and think about this C.H.S. business the stronger is my conviction that if we condemn C.H.S. for his action & are silent about the modern thought men, we shall drive many of our friends from us to C.H.S. At the same time I would not at bidding of C.H.S. take action against the men he assails. Why not part from him graciously, without rendering evil for evil, and then declare in unmistakable language the evangelical character of the Baptist Union? I stick to my text - No Creed, & therefore no pronouncing on the merits of the attack (of C.H.S.) or the defence (by Thew & Co).¹⁷

So far as the letter was concerned, the meeting of officials and ex-presidents on 16

November was largely pre-empted by the preparatory negotiations. But an unexpected development arose from the meeting, the early summoning of Council by recourse to the rule that five members could secure a meeting by written request. The initiative was probably that of Edward Bean Underhill, joint secretary of the BMS 1849-76: he drew up the requisition paper on the day of the meeting, and was the first to sign it. His co-signatories were Frederick Trestrail who had been joint BMS secretary 1849-70, Samuel G. Green of the Religious Tract Society, Joseph Angus, John Turland Brown of Northampton and Charles Williams - all the ex-presidents present at the meeting with the exception of Glover.¹⁸ Considering that there was no floating of the idea in the preceding correspondence involving officials, the requisitioning of Council should be interpreted as an attempt by the ex-presidents to secure a response to Spurgeon at once more active and more irenic than that favoured by the president and vice-president.

There is a marked lull in correspondence of a strategic nature involving Booth between 16 November and 13 December, the date of the Council meeting. It was the ex-presidents who had summoned the meeting, and it was they, rather than the officials, who prepared its principal agenda item, Joseph Angus' evangelical declarations. The alternative agenda was in the hands of two rank-and-file members, William P. Lockhart, of Toxteth Tabernacle, Liverpool, and Samuel Vincent, of George Street, Plymouth, both of whom had communicated their concerns to Booth in advance of the meeting. Lockhart notified Booth of his determination to question officials and former officials in order to establish that Spurgeon had not prior to his resignation communicated misgivings that they ought to have shared with Council, with the aim of negating Spurgeon's defence of his resignation; Vincent brought forward a suggestion that Council should appoint a deputation to meet Spurgeon and hopefully achieve a reconciliation.¹⁹ While Booth did not appear to have any strategy at this juncture, Culross showed that his sympathies lay much more with Lockhart than with Angus in a letter in which he endeavoured to put some backbone into Booth prior to the Council meeting.²⁰ It is now apparent that Council's 'revolt' - its decision to set aside Angus' evangelical declarations and take up Vincent's suggestion of sending a delegation to Spurgeon to sort out misunderstandings and differences - was directed against the ex-presidents rather than against the officials, and that the lack of an official lead in the meeting reflected the misgivings felt by Culross, and probably by Clifford too, over the stance of Williams, Angus and their fellow ex-presidents.

The negotiation of the terms of reference of the meeting between Spurgeon and the 'four doctors', as the Baptist Union delegation of Culross, Clifford, Booth and McLaren became known, is the episode of the controversy on which the revelations of the Baptist Union archive seem to me most significant. Spurgeon reacted to Booth's telegram²¹ informing him of the appointment of the delegation with great suspicion and caution. He asked them not to travel to Provence to meet him but to await his return; more significantly, he laid down a two-pronged condition for

agreeing to a meeting at all:

If you are going to discuss the question of my action towards the Union, I decline an interview . . . If the object is anything beyond a friendly deliberation as to future action, I decline to meet the deputation either here or anywhere else for an unreported conversation.²²

In his final paragraph Spurgeon said he would write again when he knew more.

Spurgeon's conditions were awkward because his charges and resignation were precisely the matters that most interested the Union leaders.²³ In his reply Booth agreed to Spurgeon's request that they should await his return, but said that he would have to consult his deputation colleagues before any possible comment on Spurgeon's conditions.²⁴ Culross suggested waiting till Spurgeon wrote again, then referred to the problem of Spurgeon's conditions: 'I am not sure how much is intended by the words, "*to discuss the question of my action towards the Union*"; but it would be extremely difficult to act under Mr Vincent's motion without touching that question.'²⁵ Booth was evidently restive about this inactivity, and reacted in the same way as in the similar situation he faced in the aftermath of Spurgeon's resignation: he suggested consulting the ex-presidents. This time both Culross and Clifford opposed him, Clifford hesitantly but Culross firmly, and both continued to counsel that they wait for Spurgeon to make the next move.²⁶ It is likely that they hoped that Spurgeon would relax his conditions or cease to refer to them and let them lapse by default.

Any hopes that Culross and Clifford may have entertained from Spurgeon's promised follow-up letter must have evaporated when it arrived: it was merely a brief note to say that he had heard nothing more about the Council meeting to justify adding anything to his earlier letter.²⁷ Booth copied it to Culross and Clifford on 28 December, but the Union delegation did not spring into action until 3 January 1888. On that date Culross came up to London²⁸ and worked with Booth and Clifford on the draft of a letter to Spurgeon. This they sent to McLaren for comment - the first evidence for the involvement of the fourth member of the delegation.²⁹ The draft quoted two sensitive sentences from Spurgeon's letter of 14 December, one expressing his hesitation about meeting them as a Union deputation, and the other stating his refusal to discuss his action toward the Union. In reply they expressed the hope that Spurgeon's hesitations were removed and he could name a time, then baldly stated: 'We have however no authority from Council to accept a proviso that would have the effect of excluding any subject covered by your printed utterances.'³⁰ This was frank language, but, as McLaren observed, it would probably have led Spurgeon to decline to see them. He suggested that they could secure a meeting and at the same time secure freedom to introduce their own agenda by deleting the sentence quoted above and substituting for it a quotation of the Council delegation appointing them '. . . to deliberate with him as to how the unity of our denomination in truth, love and good works may best be maintained.' The outcome of continued redrafting was that Booth, Culross and Clifford accepted

this advice; in fact they went further than McLaren suggested, and dropped their quotation of Spurgeon's condition altogether.³¹

Spurgeon consulted his brother James,³² then made short shrift of the delegation's efforts to secure an open agenda for the meeting:

In my letter I laid down very explicit conditions upon which I can consent to see the Deputation, and I will not see the deputation unless those conditions are understood and accepted.

I wish your letter had not avoided my demand, for it is not lightly made. The wording of the resolution is kind enough, but if it does not mean what it says I have no care for verbiage. If it means what I judge it to mean then it includes my conditions.³³

He then suggested a time of meeting, should they accept his terms.

Booth wrote to his three colleagues quoting Spurgeon's letter in full. He questioned whether, in the light of Spurgeon's insistence on his conditions, they could justify seeing him before consulting the ex-presidents and officers, and possibly Council itself. If they concurred in his judgement he proposed to copy Spurgeon's latest letter to the ex-presidents and officers.³⁴ Culross came up to London again to confer with Booth and Clifford,³⁵ while McLaren wrote with his views:

As I was not at the Council meeting, which appointed the dep. I cannot speak with confidence of the power which we have to accept his conditions. Indeed, I scarcely know what the dep was meant to say or do. But I should accept the conditions, if by them is meant the exclusion of Mr Spurgeon's action from the discussion, for the simple reason that there is no use in crying over spilt milk, and that the only question worth considering is - can we do anything to retain him? I should not be sorry if the interview were to fall through, but I should be sorry if it fell through by reason of our action.³⁶

He added that his ill health would prevent him being present should the meeting go ahead. Culross and Clifford by no means shared McLaren's readiness to accept the conditions: the draft reply they worked out with Booth continued wrestling with Spurgeon over them. This time they quoted both the sentences in Spurgeon's 14 December letter that laid them down, and asked: 'May I ask whether these conditions are intended to preclude all reference to the past, and are meant to restrict our conference to the duty of the Union for the future?' They posted the draft to McLaren on 10 January (it probably crossed in the post with McLaren's letter of the same date). McLaren's telegraphed comment read 'Conditions plain letter needless but I concur mend sentence beginning may I its two questions mean same.'³⁷ McLaren's thinking at this point is quite straightforward: either they accept Spurgeon's conditions (which were indeed plain enough) and meet, or they reject them and abandon a meeting; he preferred the former. It was not shared by his

colleagues: though they also wanted a meeting, Culross and Clifford at least were not prepared to accept Spurgeon's conditions. The point of the 'needless' letter was to attempt for a second time the stratagem of Booth's letter of 6 January: to find a way round or through Spurgeon's awkward conditions. Spurgeon had prevented them from side-stepping them, so they tried by means of their weighted double question to get him to redefine them in such a way that they could find a chink through which to introduce their own agenda.

Spurgeon again parried their thrust, employing direct and forceful language:

I very much regret that if my letter needed explanation you did not seek it at once. Your avoiding allusion to my conditions in yours of January 6 forced me to request an explicit answer. These delays and hesitations make me feel that you put a different meaning on the resolution of Council to what I do. I had some reason to think so at the first, and it has been confirmed.

I will try to be as plain as I can in this instance. Of course I would not 'preclude all reference to the past.' It would be unreasonable and impossible.

But I wished you to be quite clear that I have quitted the Baptist Union for good reasons, and have given those reasons to the world, and as I have not changed in reference to them, I decline to go over them in private before four persons. I put the reason for this very clearly and need not repeat it. The matter has been threshed out in public, and I am not upon the defensive; if I were so, I should not choose a private room for the debate.

In clear English terms you are deputed to *deliberate with me as to how the unity of our denomination in truth, love, and good works may best be maintained*, and I have already said that I do not decline such deliberation, although I added my fear that I had very little advice to contribute, for the subject is a very difficult one.

If you mean this, and no more, *I trust you will fix the time without further delay*. If you mean more than the plain words bear, I do not see the use of our meeting.³⁸

In a postscript Spurgeon added, 'This is not to withdraw anything in former letters, but to explain.' Booth's reply was sent on the same day: Spurgeon should expect Culross, Clifford and himself the following morning.³⁹

The Baptist Union delegation came into that meeting with a statement that read as follows:

1. We are come to deliberate with you on the *maintenance* of the union in truth and love and good works of the Baptist Union.
2. The circumstance that threatens that unity with a breach is the resignation of C.H.S.; therefore our first question is -
Whether anything has occurred since the resignation was sent in to the secretary to induce Mr S. to consider the possibility of withdrawing it?
3. If not; our next question is -

Can we do anything now that will secure that result? If so, what?

4. In addition to the above, the unity of the Baptist Union is menaced by the charges of C.H.S. that -

(a) It is a confederacy of evil,

(b) that there are men, unnamed, who are disloyal to the Evangelical faith.

Will C.H.S. withdraw (a) or give evidence for (b)?⁴⁰

It is probable that Culross, Clifford and Booth were all involved in the decision to go ahead with the meeting, bringing to it the agenda quoted above, and that McLaren was not involved.⁴¹ Time was running out fast (the timetable was constrained by the Council meeting fixed for 18 January), and McLaren had excused himself from participating owing to illness; those considerations may have sufficed to justify the minds of his three colleagues ceasing to consult the one member of the delegation who saw the alternatives as accepting Spurgeon's conditions or renouncing the meeting. The three principal officers of the Baptist Union evidently concluded that Spurgeon's letter of 12 January opened up a crack in his conditions big enough to allow them to introduce the subjects of Spurgeon's resignation and charges. Two points in the letter can be adduced in a way favourable to their interpretation: firstly, Spurgeon took the bait proffered in Booth's letter of 11 January by admitting that it would be unreasonable and impossible to preclude all reference to the past; secondly, Spurgeon leaned rather heavily on the question of the interpretation of the Council resolution and, whereas to him it did not include any reference to his actions, to them it implied such a reference. Against this it must be said that Spurgeon voiced his suspicions that they were not negotiating in a completely straightforward way, repeated (more explicitly than before) his refusal to discuss his resignation with them, told them that he did not see the use of their meeting if they read more into the Council resolution than he did, and said that the current letter was explanatory - he withdrew nothing in his previous letters. In Spurgeon's mind his original conditions were in place, and there has to be something casuistic about the logic that overthrew them in the minds of the three Baptist leaders. This is an instance of people acting amid the pressure of controversy in a way they themselves might have considered dubious in other circumstances.

There is no indication that Spurgeon openly questioned the propriety of his interlocutors' behaviour during the meeting.⁴² But their surprise agenda increased the hurt of the Council's 18 January 'vote of censure' and underlay his bitter remarks in the February 1888 edition of *The Sword and the Trowel*⁴³ - which should now be read a little more charitably.

The uncovering of this correspondence between Spurgeon and Booth of December 1887 and January 1888 sheds light on the broader question of communications between the two that has brought much confusion in the historiography of the controversy. In a review of Marchant's biography of Clifford, John Charles Carlile stated that the last word on the controversy could only be said by the possessors of this correspondence: Booth had refused Spurgeon permission

to publish the letters, some of which he himself had seen.⁴⁴ Carlile expanded on this in the Down Grade chapter of his biography of Spurgeon, in which he made the Booth correspondence the pivotal issue, claiming that Booth had consulted Spurgeon in 1887 because he was himself concerned about theological developments in the Baptist Union.⁴⁵ His sources are weak and his account is shaky - the idea that Booth continued to feed Spurgeon with evidence about liberalism after the Down Grade controversy began is preposterous. Later writers embellished the story, in particular by introducing the fiction that Spurgeon was unable to produce evidence to prove his charges because it was largely contained in correspondence from Booth which its author would not let him publish.⁴⁶ It seems that Carlile was close enough to Spurgeon to be aware of the smoke rising up from the Booth correspondence, but not close enough to identify correctly the seat of the fire. There were two significant exchanges of letters between the two men: one in the period 1883-87 in which Spurgeon (and not Booth) aired his concerns at theological developments in the Baptist Union,⁴⁷ and that of December 1887-January 1888 in which Booth negotiated the terms of reference of the Union delegation's meeting with Spurgeon. The former was under the spotlight in Lockhart's questions in Council in December 1887; Spurgeon showed his chagrin at Booth's answers to the questions in a letter to his wife,⁴⁸ but was completely silent about the matter in his correspondence with Booth himself. The latter may have rankled even more, but never fuelled public debate. There is neither evidence nor need for the hypothesis of a third major correspondence.

The archive leaves a faint but redolent trace of the meeting of the ex-presidents and officials on 17 January 1888, in the shape of a scribbled note left on Booth's desk in the course of the day. This affords another glimpse of Charles Williams in the role of leader of the forces of moderation, leading in the move to tone down William Landels' original draft of the 'vote of censure'.⁴⁹ The compromise they accepted removed the final clause that Spurgeon's charges 'ought to be withdrawn', while modifying the preceding clause to read 'ought not to have been made' rather than 'should not have been made'.⁵⁰

Williams' concern that condemnation of Spurgeon would strengthen support for him proved justified. The archive shows that this happened in the important case of William Cuff - and where Cuff led, many supporters of Spurgeon followed. Booth was aware of Cuff's significance as the minister of the large Shoreditch Tabernacle, a Council member, and a very influential and moderate former student of the Pastors' College; that is why he consulted him about Down Grade-related developments within the Pastors' College Association from an early stage in the controversy.⁵¹ Culross encouraged Booth to cultivate Cuff, whom he considered 'not past hope'.⁵² Cuff was touchingly frank with Booth about the agonizing conflict of loyalties into which Spurgeon's resignation plunged him, resolved in favour of standing by the Baptist Union rather than Spurgeon.⁵³ But in February 1888 Cuff wrote that 'the vote of censure had altered everything'; at the recent

meeting of the London ministers of the Pastors' College Association, where he had seconded a resolution in favour of establishing an evangelical basis for the Baptist Union, there had been a totally different mood from that of the November meeting.⁵⁴

The declarations passed in the Council meeting of 21 February, in an amended form suggested by Clifford, did not square with the conservative understanding of an evangelical basis. James Archer Spurgeon tabled an amendment for the forthcoming Baptist Union Assembly, thereby reinforcing his position as the leader of Spurgeon's supporters in the Union. He began to throw his weight around: a letter to Booth shows him asking for corrections to the February Council minutes, complaining about not having been called on to speak there, objecting to the Council decision to nominate to the vice-presidency John Thomas Wigner, of Brockley Road, London, 'a bitter partisan . . . who is so unpopular with many', and claiming a quasi-official status: 'Don't drive me to open objection to this if you can help it. I think under the circumstances a little consultation (of the kind well known in politics) with the leader of the opposition on this point would have been wise to secure the harmonious working of Public business.'⁵⁵

Even though few of Booth's own letters survive there is ample evidence in the Baptist Union Down Grade correspondence for the parlous condition of his nerves, which led him to exaggerate and personalize criticism, and react very sharply to it. Time and again correspondents responded to his replies to their letters with soothing language, words to the effect that Booth had misunderstood them, that no personal reflections on him had been intended. A certain John Jones provides an example: 'I am sorry that my question - Has the Baptist Union a creed? - has given you offence. The question was not intended to apply to you personally but to the Union. I have never doubted your soundness in the faith.'⁵⁶ Booth's activism in the controversy appears to have been at least in part inspired by his deep anxiety. We have already seen some aspects of this activism - the urge to consult, to broaden the circle consulted, and to act - and the way in which his president in particular sometimes restrained him. Another facet of his activism was his tireless following up of press reports and rumours, whether to correct errors or acquire more detailed information - many of his Down Grade letters fall into this category.

In late March 1888 Booth's anxiety and activity reached a climax. On 29 March he wrote - and, unusually, preserved copies of - three important letters, each quite different from the others, to Culross, Williams and William Landels (who had since January joined the small inner circle of senior people consulted). In them he rehearsed recent worrying developments: Spurgeon's comments in the April edition of *The Sword and the Trowel*, which Booth interpreted as presaging an attempt by Spurgeon to capture the Baptist Union;⁵⁷ a 20 March Pastors' College Evangelical Association circular offering help to members hoping to stay in London over the weekend separating its meetings from those of the Baptist Union;⁵⁸ rumours about alarming levels of support for Spurgeon in certain Baptist constituencies; the

considerable minority vote for Spurgeon in the London Baptist Association on 27 March;⁵⁹ and, crucially, the arrival the previous day of the block nomination for election to Council of forty-nine Spurgeon supporters.⁶⁰ In response to this Booth proposed to Culross a meeting in Bristol to discuss the 'very critical' situation. Culross' reply to this shows sensitivity to denominational tensions: 'There is a little fear in various quarters of what emanates from Bristol, or I should say, Come, at once. Have you seen McLaren at all? I wish we could have his strong support.'⁶¹

But Booth reserved his main initiative for his letters to Williams and Landels. This was to break with precedent by publishing Council nominations in *two* alphabetical lists, separating existing Council members from new nominations; this would enable supporters of the Union leadership to vote *en bloc* for the existing Council with its strong anti-Spurgeon majority and foil any pro-Spurgeon attempts to prevail by block voting. This was behaviour quite different from earlier stages in the controversy: Booth is making his own decisions rather than deferring to his president and vice-president, and also deciding for himself whom to consult. It is possible that the situation faced by the Baptist Union now appeared so desperate that Booth was no longer prepared to risk being met with the reassurance and inaction that Culross and Clifford had counselled at earlier points.⁶²

The letters of 29 March show Booth to have become resigned to a bruising confrontation in the Baptist Union Assembly of 23 April, and to be preoccupied with winning it. His separation of nominations into two lists was to prove highly successful. All elected members of the previous Council who stood again were re-elected: the figures, now for the first time available, show that the least popular of them, a lay member who had failed to attend a single Council meeting during the year (numbers of attendances were given on the voting papers), received 553 votes, whereas the most successful of the new nominees, Frederick Brotherton Meyer, the rising star of the denomination who moved that year from Leicester to Regent's Park, could attract only 536.⁶³ The voting figures also permit a better estimation of the strength of support for Spurgeon than was previously available - an indication as to what would have happened had J. A. Spurgeon pressed his amendment to the vote. The average vote for new Council candidates known to be Spurgeon supporters was 318; the number of delegates voting is estimated at 1163,⁶⁴ which means Spurgeon's support stood at some 27%. Looking across to the other end of the theological spectrum, the 25% votes for James Thew of Leicester gives a measure of the strength of liberal sympathies. Add to this the 318 average vote for the Spurgeon slate, and the 588 votes recorded by the second lowest (and active!) scorer among the 68 standing for re-election, and the resulting figure of 1164 can be broken down as 51% moderate, 27% conservative, and 22% liberal - figures that should be viewed with much caution.

When Council met on Friday, 20 April 1888, it became clear that both sides would like to avoid a confrontation if possible. The wording of the clause of the

declaration on future punishment was identified as the main point of contention, and five men were asked to explore its possible amendment - Culross, Williams, Landels, Cuff and Thomas Vincent Tymms.⁶⁵ They added the words 'and rejecting the dogmas of Purgatory and Universalism' to the footnote on the subject, but when Council reconvened on Saturday it became known that J. A. Spurgeon (who had seen his brother in the interval) did not consider this sufficient ground for withdrawing his amendment. At this point rivalry between Spurgeon's moderate and hard-line opponents came to the surface again: Landels, supported by Culross, pressed for the inclusion in the resolution of a statement about the insufficiency of Spurgeon's evidence - repetition of the 'vote of censure' - but Williams successfully resisted this. Williams was quite justified in pointing out later that the Landels/Culross proposal would have barred the final compromise.⁶⁶

That compromise was sealed in Council on Monday, 23 April, just before the great debate was due to start, following James Spurgeon's agreement to withdraw his amendment on condition that the first two clauses of the Council declaration be dropped (clauses that down graded the authority of the evangelical declaration that followed).⁶⁷ A letter on this subject of J. A. Spurgeon in the Baptist Union archive is of sufficient interest to quote in full:

In haste but heartily I reply (tho' in the face of two or three telegrams and your letter I am still a little in the dark without the whole documents as amended before me) yet if it is as I expect that in another form I get practically what I am aiming at; then of course I gladly comply. What am I to do? I presume, withdraw my amendment with my accustomed grace!!! and say all that I can that is healing and brotherly and in order as I do so.

I will run round by my brothers house and reach you as soon as I can, with the last and best news I can in God's name extract from him. God be praised if we have really escaped.

But only fancy what speech you have missed in losing mine!!! My wigwam will have many fewer scalps now I leave all yours on your heads in peace.⁶⁸

This establishes several points for the first time: that the compromise formula was put to J. A. Spurgeon rather than suggested by him, and that this was done by Booth (or possibly through Booth); also that in his eagerness to step back from the brink at the last moment James Spurgeon did not give any considered attention to the resolution and declarations as an entity; finally, that he consulted his brother even over this last concession.⁶⁹ When the younger Spurgeon heard the interpretation of the amended declarations contained in Charles Williams' proposing speech (which explicitly allowed the 'larger hope'), his own seconding speech showed that he was beginning to have second thoughts but was refusing to listen to them.⁷⁰ After the elder brother had read reports of the debate he wrote to Williams saying that had he been there he would have opposed the resolution as interpreted by Williams' speech.⁷¹ But he was not there: at the last C. H. Spurgeon paid dearly for his

early resignation from the Baptist Union.

The Baptist Union's Down Grade archive illuminates the competition between two quite different approaches to Spurgeon, a competition that endured throughout the controversy. It is plain that there would have been a schism had the robust confrontational approach of Culross, Clifford, Landels and Glover prevailed at the last. Their ascendancy between the December and January Council meetings, culminating in the 'vote of censure', set the Union on a course toward disruption, a fate avoided because of the last-minute intervention of proponents of the other approach. McLaren consistently adopted the irenic approach, as did a majority of ex-presidents that included Angus and Underhill, but its principal champion was Charles Williams. At several points, notably in the final stage of the drama, Booth's tendency to side with his most recent ex-president proved crucial. The credit for maintaining the unity of the Baptist Union is Booth's and Williams', and not Culross' or Clifford's.

Paradoxically, Spurgeon would have been much happier in the long run with the ascendancy of his more forthright opponents. Abandonment of his meeting with the four doctors (all but certain had McLaren not led his colleagues to think again about their initial response to Spurgeon's conditions), a stronger 'vote of censure' (followed by a second at the February meeting of Council), above all a resolution that closed the door on Booth's final approach to his brother, all would have helped him achieve the aim he eventually settled for, namely an evangelical fellowship outside the Baptist Union. His discomfiture was also due to his having been out-manoeuvred on two occasions: once - in dubious circumstances - over negotiating the terms of reference for his meeting with the four doctors, and once over the final compromise.

NOTES

- 1 The one exception is Payne's quotation of letters from Spurgeon to Booth written in the years leading up to the Down Grade controversy, the originals of which are now in this collection. Whether he saw these or copies held elsewhere (for some of which I have no record) I do not know. Ernest Payne, 'The Down Grade Controversy: a postscript', *BQ* 28, 1979, pp.148-51.
- 2 Mark Hopkins, 'Spurgeon's Opponents in the Downgrade Controversy', *BQ* 33, 1988, pp.274-94; 'Baptists, Congregationalists, and Theological Change: Some Leaders and Controversies' (unpublished DPhil dissertation, University of Oxford, 1988).
- 3 Thomas Stockwell to Booth, 2 September 1887. All reference to correspondence is to MS letters in the new Down Grade material in the Angus Library unless otherwise indicated.
- 4 He said as much to T. R. Stevenson, a Council member, who to Booth's displeasure published the remark in the *Derby Daily Telegraph*. Stevenson to Booth, 18 November 1887.
- 5 Clifford to Booth, telegram, 28 October 1887; Culross to Booth, telegram, 31 October 1887.
- 6 Culross and Booth to Williams, telegram, 1 November 1887 (copy); Williams to Booth, telegram, 1 November 1887.
- 7 My own count of the returns in the archive: it is possible that a few replies have gone missing - Council membership was 100.
- 8 Culross, Clifford and Booth, circular letter to the Council of the Baptist Union, 2

- November 1887. Cf. Frederick A. Jones to Booth, 3 November 1887: 'I should vote for the Council meeting at once if there was anything we could do to remedy the mischief done, but I can see no way and your letter does not suggest that you have any.'
- 9 A Cheltenham minister and Council member, trained at Pastors' College but not supportive of Spurgeon.
 - 10 Williams to Booth, 8 & 10 November 1887.
 - 11 [Booth] to Avery, telegram, 11 November 1887; Booth to Baptist Union officers and ex-presidents, circular letter, 11 November 1887.
 - 12 McLaren chose to spell his name Maclaren on publications, and he appears thus in *DNB*. *Who Was Who* records him as M'Laren.
 - 13 Williams to Booth, 12 November 1887. His case was shaky: the distinction between Booth as friend and secretary was not mentioned before Williams became disenchanted with the way things were going; Glover as an ex-president was indubitably qualified to take part in deliberations and had indeed been mentioned in this vein by Williams in an earlier letter; nor had Williams issued any instructions restricting the circulation of his draft letter to Spurgeon.
 - 14 Culross to Booth, 14 November 1887; Culross to Aldis, drafter of telegram, ?14 November 1887. Culross was later dropped from among the signatories, thereby eliminating all official connection with the Union.
 - 15 *British Weekly*, 18 November 1887.
 - 16 Angus to Booth, n.d. [c.19 November 1887].
 - 17 Williams to Booth, 26 November 1887. Cf. a similar passage in Williams to Booth, 9 December 1887.
 - 18 Underhill and others, Requisition of Council, 16 November 1887 (in folder marked 'Council Meeting December 13 1887').
 - 19 Lockhart to Booth, 10 December 1887 (cf. Lockhart to Booth 10 & 22 November 1887); Vincent to Booth, 4 November 1887. Lockhart had in fact contacted Culross first, and Culross sagely suggested that he give advance notice to all who would be expected to answer, so as to allow them to draw up telling replies, and not be caught unprepared.
 - 20 'I very sincerely regret this tendency toward creed-making, which is sure to create division . . . I think it would be well to have a clear and unfaltering reply to Lockhart's questions - which he does well to ask.' Culross to Booth, 9 December 1887.
 - 21 Booth to Spurgeon, telegram, 13 December 1887. All communications between Booth and Spurgeon in the period between the December Council meeting and Spurgeon's meeting with the delegation on 13 January 1888 are reprinted in a document in the Baptist Union archive entitled 'Council of the Baptist Union re Withdrawal of Rev. C. H. Spurgeon', marked "Strictly Private and Confidential, for the use of Special Committee only. - S.H.B."
 - 22 Spurgeon to Booth, 14 December 1887.
 - 23 At one point Culross said they could not consent to anything that would prevent them 'entering on the subject in all its bearings'. Culross to Booth, 5 January 1888.
 - 24 Booth to Spurgeon, 16 December 1887.
 - 25 Culross to Booth, 19 December 1887 (emphasis original).
 - 26 Culross to Booth, 20 December 1887; Clifford to Booth, 20 December 1887.
 - 27 Spurgeon to Booth, 26 December 1887.
 - 28 [Culross] to Booth, telegram, 2 January 1888.
 - 29 The fact that Spurgeon's letter of 26 December 1887 is marked as having been copied to McLaren on 3 January 1888, a week after it was copied to Culross and Clifford, plus the lack in the archive of any communication from McLaren prior to 4 January, make it unlikely that he had been consulted at an earlier stage. This may have been because Booth knew that McLaren was ill (he had lumbago and sciatica - McLaren to Booth, 4 January 1888).
 - 30 Draft letter to Spurgeon, 3 January 1888 - copy.
 - 31 McLaren to Booth, 4 January 1888; Booth to Spurgeon, 6 January 1888.
 - 32 Spurgeon to Booth, 7 January 1888.
 - 33 Spurgeon to Booth, 9 January 1888.
 - 34 Booth to 1 Dr Clifford, 2 Dr Culross, 3 Dr McLaren, 9 January 1888.
 - 35 Booth to Spurgeon, 10 January 1888 (this letter merely told Spurgeon that they were waiting for McLaren's input before

- replying).
- 36 McLaren to Booth, 10 January 1888.
- 37 McLaren to Booth, telegram, 10.27 a.m., 11 January 1888.
- 38 Spurgeon to Booth, 12 January 1888 (emphasis Spurgeon's own).
- 39 Booth to Spurgeon, 12 January 1888.
- 40 Quoted in Charles T. Bateman, *John Clifford MA, BSc, LLB, DD: Free Church Leader and Preacher*, 1904, p.145. No copy of this statement is preserved in the Baptist Union archive.
- 41 There are a number of gaps in the evidence, but the case for this contention is in my judgement strong. Culross was in London on 10 January and probably stayed over at least until the next day to participate in any modification of their draft letter in response to McLaren's comments (on 10 January Booth wrote a brief note to Spurgeon, 'Dr Culross and Dr Clifford have been with me, and we wish to consult Dr McLaren before sending our reply' (emphasis mine)). Spurgeon had already suggested Friday morning for the meeting so Culross may well have decided to stay over. Then there is no sign of telegraphic communication between Booth and Culross after 10 January - had Culross returned to Bristol he would at the very least have been informed that the meeting was confirmed. Also, for Booth not to have consulted his president at such a vital juncture would have been uncharacteristic. In support of Clifford's participation there is a telegram to Booth saying 'will try to come' (11.08 a.m. 12 January): this would have been to discuss Spurgeon's letter of that day, whether anticipated or already to hand, and prepare Booth's reply of the same date. There is no indication of further communication with McLaren after receipt of his comments on the 11 January letter to Spurgeon.
- 42 The meeting itself appears to have been a polite and rather cold affair, lasting two hours (Culross in 18 January Council meeting - transcript in the archive). The archive contains some notes and papers showing how Booth and James Archer Spurgeon worked toward an agreed summary of the content of the meeting.
- 43 For example, 'The Baptist Union could readily clear itself without going into personal details. Let it tell the world what it believes. And yet we do not know whether its present council could be trusted to do that. It might say one thing, and mean another.' *The Sword and the Trowel*, 1888, p.91; cf. pp.81-83.
- 44 *The Baptist Times and Freeman*, 2 May 1924.
- 45 J. C. Carlile, *C. H. Spurgeon: An Interpretative Biography*, 1933, pp.244-9.
- 46 This appears, for example, in a scholarly biography of Spurgeon, P. S. Kruppa's *Charles Haddon Spurgeon: A Preacher's Progress*, New York 1982, pp.427-8.
- 47 Spurgeon's letters to Booth and copies of two from Booth to Spurgeon are in the Baptist Union Down Grade archive; their content has already been divulged by Ernest A. Payne in 'The Down Grade Controversy: A Postscript', *BQ* 1979, pp.148-51.
- 48 c.18 December 1887, quoted in *C. H. Spurgeon: Autobiography* (revised edition), 2, 1973, p.472.
- 49 An episode brought to public notice by David Davies, a supporter of Spurgeon on the Council, in a letter to Landels published in the *Freeman*, 26 October 1888.
- 50 Richard Glover to [Booth], Tuesday [17 January 1888]. In moving his motion Landels nonetheless said that it was implied in the motion that the charges ought to be withdrawn (transcript of Council meeting in the archive).
- 51 Cuff to Booth, 10 November 1887.
- 52 Culross to Booth, telegram, 12 November 1887. The campaign to win Cuff was one of considerable amplitude: Culross showed Cuff's 10 November letter to a Bristol minister who had studied at Pastors' College, George David Evans, who described to Booth efforts by Richard Glover to get Cuff on one side, and said 'He really has very considerable influence & will find a considerable following . . . A firm stand by Spurgeon's own men will save the Union.' G. D. Evans to Booth, 13 November 1887.
- 53 E.g. 'This has been a day of downright agony to me. I have brooded long, & prayerfully over the whole of this most painful matter. My sincere, & deep love for Mr Spurgeon has embarrassed me in every turn of thought, & conviction in the trial. I confess to you that it has been the greatest difficulty of my life, in public

- matters, and related things. I have swung from one side to the other till I have been too dizzie to sleep . . . Set your mind at rest about me. I have to day made up my mind. It has cost me more than I can tell in words, but I am resolved at all costs to stand by the Union. It breaks my heart to forsake Mr Spurgeon, but I must do right, and I am convinced this is right.' Cuff to Booth, Saturday [12 November 1887]; cf Cuff to Booth, 28 October & 10 November 1887.
- 54 Cuff to Booth, 10 February 1888.
- 55 J. A. Spurgeon to Booth, 16-17 March 1888. Wigner's combative spirit is illustrated in a letter to Booth in which, speaking of a supporter of Spurgeon, he wrote 'Let us *shovel* him out before the Ann^d Meeting!' - J. T. Wigner to Booth, 22 February 1888.
- 56 John Jones to Booth, 4 January 1888. To offer one further instance, Alfred Pickles wrote to Booth on 20 December 1887, asking, 'Is there or not, a confederacy, to keep [divine ordinances and gospel truths] in the background, & out of sight?' On 31 December he hurriedly responded to Booth's 30 December reply with these words: 'Forgive me I pray if I touched a personal chord I did not intend to do. I never imagined such a thing as you being Jesuitical. I would not entertain such a thought about one of the aged and honoured fathers of our Denomination.' 'Jesuitical' was clearly Booth's word. It may be significant that both of the quoted episodes date from the period of the negotiation of the terms of reference of the meeting between Spurgeon and the four doctors.
- 57 In fact Spurgeon knew very well that his supporters would be defeated in a Union Assembly vote, and saw such a vote as a prelude to their joining him in withdrawal: see Hopkins, 'Baptists, Congregationalists and Theological Change', pp.241-2.
- 58 A copy of this 'private' circular is in the Baptist Union archive, one indication of the success of Booth's intelligence gathering activities.
- 59 The figures are 164 for the Union, 131 for Spurgeon. But London, Spurgeon's home and scene of his most intensive church-planting activity, was not typical of the country as a whole.
- 60 The controversy had brought home to Spurgeon's supporters the fact that their representation on the Council (between five and ten per cent) fell considerably short of their support in the denomination; concern on this had already been expressed by Spurgeon at his meeting with the four doctors - see a set of notes on the meeting in the Baptist Union archive containing amendments in J. A. Spurgeon's handwriting.
- 61 Culross to Booth, 3 April 1888.
- 62 There is no evidence as to Clifford's role at this stage, but Culross's letter of 3 April lends support to the idea that the silence of Booth's letter to him of 29 March on the subject of his Council nomination idea betokens non-consultation, for in it he suggests tentatively a less radical solution to the problem than Booth's own: 'I greatly fear we shall have a fighting Council next year. I think it all but certain J.A.S. will get some of the most determined of their men - and, if they are good as well as determined, this might not be an unmixed evil. By the way, I suppose it is without precedent, and would be strongly resented, that you should *publish* the nomination list before voting day. If this could be done, it would give sufficient time to consider the names beforehand; but I fear this cannot be.' Culross to Booth, 3 April 1888. If Booth was prepared to bypass Culross, there is no reason why he should not have bypassed Clifford too, who had a similar approach to the controversy to the president.
- 63 Baptist Union Council voting returns, 1888. Meyer was elected because 2 of the 70 elected members of the previous Council (the other 30 were co-opted) were not standing for re-election. There may be some interest in the 'top ten'. It is headed by Joseph Angus (1056 votes); there follow in order James Culross, William Cuff, James Baillie (minister of Bloomsbury Chapel), Alexander McLaren, Alfred Henry Baynes (secretary of the BMS), William Stott (a Spurgeon supporter ministering at Abbey Road, St John's Wood), J. A. Spurgeon, Charles Williams and William Landels (959 votes). Richard Glover narrowly missed out; two more ex-presidents, E. B. Underhill and J. T.

- Brown, and a prominent Spurgeon supporter, David Davies, were the only others to exceed 900 votes. As president and vice-president John Clifford and J. T. Wigner did not participate in the contest.
- 64 Calculated as follows: the count having been done in blocks, there are 13 sub-totals, the sum of the highest scores in each is 1108, an absolute minimum number voting. Angus' vote is 95% of this figure, a composite figure made up of individual votes for the three candidates who followed him very closely in the ballot (with 1049-1055 votes). So the highest scorer in each of the sub-totals is estimated to have also obtained about 95% of the total votes cast in that block. It is not possible to calculate by division of the total number of votes cast as some evidently did not exercise all their 70 votes. Voting papers were distributed to delegates before the last-minute compromise but handed in after it, so some voters may have toned down partisan voting intentions.
- 65 Tymms was the counter-balance to Cuff: minister of the Downs Chapel, Clapton, and an irenic and respected figure of liberal theological tendencies.
- 66 Williams to Booth, 28 April 1888.
- 67 'Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland. Minutes of Meetings of the Council, held at 19 Furnival Street, E.C., on Friday, 20th April, 1888, at 8.30 a.m., and (by adjournment) at 4.00 p.m.; on Saturday, 21st April, 1888, at 3.00 p.m.; and in the Vestry of the City Temple, Holborn Viaduct, London, E.C., on Monday, 23rd April, 1888, at 2.30 p.m.', in Baptist Union Council Minute Book, 1887-89, p.202, *Freeman*, 27 April 1888, and Charles Williams in *The National Baptist*, Philadelphia, 31 May 1888.
- 68 J. A. Spurgeon to Booth, 22 April 1888.
- 69 This corrects my statement that C. H. Spurgeon had no part in the final compromise - Hopkins, 'Baptists, Congregationalists, and Theological Change', p.245 - and makes sense of Spurgeon's failure to come down hard on his brother, and also of his statement, 'We are sold, not betrayed but entrapped by diplomatists' (Spurgeon to Wright, 27 April 1888, quoted in Kruppa, *op.cit.* pp.442-3.
- 70 Hopkins, 'Baptists, Congregationalists, and Theological Change', p.244; cf. Landels to Booth, 28 April 1888: 'I did not think J.A.S. quite realized all it meant when he agreed to second.'
- 71 Williams in *The National Baptist*, Philadelphia, 31 May 1888.

MARK HOPKINS *Theological College of Northern Nigeria*

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SOCIETY NEWS

The Annual General Meeting 1994 will take place on Wednesday, 27 April, at 3.30 p.m., following the seminars, at the Baptist Assembly, Bridlington, Yorkshire. The lecturer will be the Revd Dr W. C. R. Hancock, and his subject,

NO COMPROMISE Nonconformity and Politics 1893-1914

The Summer School will be held at the United Theological College, Aberystwyth, Dyfed, from 30 June to 3 July 1994. The inclusive residential cost, from Thursday dinner to Sunday lunch, is £80-00. Arrangements can be made for day visitors. The £10-00 non-returnable booking fee should have reached the Revd Siôr Coleman, 12 Barford Crescent, Kings Norton, Birmingham B38 0BH, by Easter. Cheques payable to the Baptist Historical Society.