

THE BIBLE AND PROTESTANT ORTHODOXY: THE HERMENEUTICS OF CHARLES SPURGEON

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I. SPURGEON'S HERITAGE

Protestant orthodoxy is a direct descendant of the Reformation. More than Luther or Zwingli, its patron saint is John Calvin. It was Calvin's theological system with its extremely high view of Scripture as the depository of the apostolic tradition that formed the cornerstone of orthodoxy's understanding of the faith. Second to Luther in his depth perception of the Bible, Calvin was superior in his systematization of its teachings. In Calvin, theories regarding the inspiration of the Biblical documents began to appear that became characteristic of the Protestant scholastics of the seventeenth century. These seventeenth-century divines found in Calvin a source book for their doctrine of verbal inspiration. His legal mind needed a codebook, a document, a systematic statement of God's revelation to humankind, and he found it in Scripture. The writers of Scripture were "amanuenses," "penmen," "clerks." "The Holy Spirit dictated to the prophets and apostles," he wrote in his commentary on Jeremiah.¹

It should be remembered in fairness to Calvin that in the days that preceded the historical and literary analysis of the Bible, such assertions did not lead to the complications they would today. It should also be noted that the later generations of theologians who hardened Calvin's views into dogmatic categories did not do justice to the Reformer's own witness to the human dimension of the revelation in the Bible. As we observe in Luther, so there is in Calvin as well a responsible respect for Biblical authority, but this was accompanied by a freedom of interpretation that allowed him to question the text and to see a superior value in the NT where God's redeeming activity was more explicit in his once-and-for-all revelation in Jesus Christ. From the OT to the NT there was an increasingly explicit view of revelation, from the hint in the promise to Adam to the open declaration at Calvary.

Calvin's heirs were not as balanced in their views.² The sense of liberty in interpreting the text was replaced by dogmatic tradition and an airtight doctrinal system. The reverence for Scripture was superseded by an overstated doctrine of verbal inerrancy and a rigidity in interpretation. Uniformity took the place of living thought and originality. The arbitrary tradition that the Reformers had torn away reappeared in a new form. Once again the Bible began to be read through the eyes of elaborate theological formulations. The "analogy of faith" was distort-

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¹Quoted by M. Marty, *A Short History of Christianity* (New York: World, 1973) 225.

²See Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1886) 375 ff.

ed into a method of proof-texting, and the Spirit's guidance in the interpretive process was claimed in support of one's own position. Rarely was an interpretation subject to the check of historical scrutiny. The word of God was identified with Scripture, and few bothered to distinguish between Scripture and their interpretation of Scripture.

The impulse toward an emphasis on the doctrine of verbal inerrancy was motivated by the need for a decisive oracle in the endless theological disputes that were characteristic of the era. The vacuum of authority that was created when papal infallibility was set aside was abhorred and quickly filled by the doctrine of an infallible Bible. The assumption was made that the Bible was a homogeneous, self-interpreting and verbally dictated whole, and that inferences drawn from it by dialectics and framed into theological propositions were as certain and sacred as the text itself. Ultimately the authority of Scripture was impaired by a defensive overstatement of its infallibility and by not allowing it to turn back and judge the theological structures erected from it.

Because the Bible, both the OT and NT, was seen as revelation itself, not the attestation to revelation, historical questions regarding the genuineness and integrity of the text were ignored. The Bible was inspired equally throughout. In the formula *Consensus Helvetica* of 1675, the assertion was made that even the vowel points of the Hebrew text were inspired. This mechanical artificiality made true exegesis difficult. The text was so well defended by dogma that it could not be approached except through the categories of approved dogmatic formulations.

The English representatives of Protestant orthodoxy in the seventeenth century were the Puritans, whose maximum influence in English religious life extended from 1560 until 1688 and reached its peak between 1640 and 1660 with their control of government under Oliver Cromwell. The Puritan movement began initially as an effort to reform the Church of England and check all tendencies of movement toward Rome. Their efforts at reform were not wholly unsuccessful, but by 1622 their pleas and programs for legislation in every area of life ceased to be appreciated and they were ejected from the state Church. As a result the Puritans were classified along with the separatist movement (Independents, Presbyterians, Baptists, etc.) as nonconformists.

The Puritan movement was steeped in Reformed theology and produced the historic *Westminster Confession of Faith* and innumerable volumes of dogmatics. The foundation of their confession and theological system was the assertion that the Bible was the very voice and message of God to humankind. It was the infallibly inspired work of the Holy Spirit and authoritative in all matters, including not only doctrine, worship, and church government but also civil and political problems, daily work, home life, dress, recreation and duty. The Puritans surveyed the whole gamut of life in light of the Bible and attempted to live accordingly. The literal word of Scripture was a direct message from God, spoken as much in the present as in the past.

The eighteenth century both in England and on the continent brought a number of challenges to Protestant orthodoxy. Arminius reasserted the importance of human freedom and responsibility, and the Pietists argued for the validity of religious experience. Exhausted by religious wars and disputations, the countries of Europe expressed a general appeal for tolerance. Rationalistic philosophy turned its attack on the religious establishment with telling force, and arising

out of rationalism were the beginnings of Biblical criticism. But the orthodox tradition had commanded a strong allegiance from the people and would not be easily edged out.³

Charles H. Spurgeon can best be understood as a nineteenth-century representative of Protestant orthodoxy, and more particularly of the Puritans. A biographer of Spurgeon (who incidentally thinks a great deal of the Puritans) writes that Spurgeon "was completely moulded and fashioned by those spiritual giants of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Puritans. He stood in their noble tradition, in the direct line of their theology and outlook, and can without question be called the heir of the Puritans."⁴ Spurgeon himself, who had 7,000 books in his library by or about the Puritans, wrote: "We assert this day that, when we take down a volume of Puritan theology, we find in a solitary page more thinking and more learning, more Scripture, more real teaching, than in whole folios of the effusion of modern thought. The modern men would be rich if they possessed even the crumbs that fall from the table of the Puritans."⁵

Spurgeon was born on June 19, 1834, in Kelvedon, Essex, to a sturdy, lower-middle-class family that had had nonconformist sympathies for generations.⁶ When Charles was born, his father John was a clerk in a coal yard but also found time to be honorary pastor of an Independent (or Congregational) church at Tollesbury. There he preached with conviction the Calvinistic doctrines as he understood them. Spurgeon's mother was a deeply religious woman who conscientiously guided her children in the faith. Financial difficulties necessitated sending Charles to live with his grandparents early in his life. His grandfather was a pastor in an Independent chapel in Stambourne, and his grandmother and aunt were dedicated to caring for the spiritual welfare of the young boy.

The educational experiences of his youth were also to cultivate in Spurgeon an appreciation for the tradition of Protestant orthodoxy. At 14, guided by his uncle, Spurgeon became an avid reader, a habit he was to continue throughout his life. In addition to reading Shakespeare, Milton, Defoe and others, he gained an initial acquaintance with Puritan literature. In his 15th year he read Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*, James' *Anxious Enquirer*, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* and Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. Toward the end of his 15th year Spurgeon was sent up to Newmarket, Cambridgeshire, to become a pupil in the school of John Swindell. There he studied Greek, Latin and philosophy and was exposed to the environment of the university.

While in Cambridge, Spurgeon became spiritually unsettled. He began to question the adequacy of his own relationship with God, was "keenly aware of his

³J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper, 1979) 147-261. Rogers and McKim distinguish between inerrancy and infallibility, suggesting that inerrancy implies truth in every detail but that infallibility means truth to the intended meaning and not always accuracy in matters of science and history.

⁴E. W. Bacon, *Spurgeon: Heir of the Puritans* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967) 102.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁶For sympathetic treatments of Spurgeon's life in addition to Bacon see J. C. Carlile, *C. H. Spurgeon* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1933); W. Y. Fullerton, *C. H. Spurgeon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1920). I follow Bacon's account.

sin" and struggled with doubts about the truth of many Christian affirmations. On January 6, 1850, unable to get to the church of his destination because of heavy snow, he stumbled into a Methodist chapel. There was a very small congregation, and the regular minister was not preaching because he had been detained by the snowstorm. A layman in the congregation preached on the text "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth" (Isa 45:22). The message struck home, and Spurgeon was converted. He writes concerning this incident:

The cloud was gone, the darkness rolled away, and in that moment I saw the sun. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard the word LOOK, I could almost have looked my eyes away. I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith that looks alone to Him. I thought I could dance all the way home. I could understand what John Bunyan meant when he declared he wanted to tell all the crows of the ploughed land about his conversion. . . . Between half past ten, when I entered the chapel and half past twelve, when I returned home, what a change had taken place in me.⁷

Soon after his conversion Spurgeon was baptized in a Baptist church because of his convictions regarding believer's baptism. He began to study his Bible in earnest and felt called to the ministry. His first sermon was preached in Waterbeach while he was still 16 years old, and it was such a success that he was invited to be their pastor. The small church grew under his leadership, and his fame as a boy preacher spread. In the summer of 1853 he was invited to speak at the annual meeting of the Cambridge Sunday School Union. A member of the New Park Street Baptist Chapel in London heard him and was impressed enough to invite him to be a candidate for their vacant pulpit. In March of 1854 at 19 years of age he was called to this large and historic, but failing, church.

In a short time Spurgeon's preaching attracted large crowds of people, and his preaching career was under way. The 1,200-seat auditorium of the New Park Street Church was soon overflowing, and a building program was launched. In March of 1861 the Metropolitan Tabernacle was completed with a seating capacity of 5,000. Sunday after Sunday, year after year, eager worshippers crowded the auditorium to capacity.⁸

In addition to his preaching and pastoral responsibilities Spurgeon found time for a number of other activities. He was instrumental in founding a pastors' training college and an orphanage. Often he would lecture in the college on the Puritans or the Christian classics or homiletics. Always in demand to fill other pulpits, he preached in Scotland and Ireland and many parts of England. He was a prolific writer, publishing 135 volumes and editing another 28. The intense pace of life that Spurgeon sustained took its toll on his health, and he died in January of 1892 at the age of 57.

From this brief sketch of Spurgeon's life and theological heritage it is possible to piece together the main assumptions that were to guide his interpretation of the Bible. At the foundation of his approach to Scripture was his deep Christian faith and belief in the truth of the Biblical testimony. Faith in the redemptive

⁷Bacon, *Spurgeon* 24.

⁸Ibid., p. 50.

acts of God as recorded in Scripture is the ground of Spurgeon's hermeneutical system. But more specifically, what form does his faith in God's saving work take? Part of the answer to this question is found in his adherence to the main tenets of the Puritans. He seldom questioned the categories in the post-Calvinistic theology of seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism.⁹ The Bible was inspired and authoritative. God was sovereign in creation, providence and redemption. Christ the Son of God was sinful mankind's substitute in his atoning sacrifice at Calvary, and human beings are justified by faith in this deed. The Holy Spirit is active in the lives of the saints, guiding them in holy living, and ultimately they will persevere until the return of Christ. These mutually dependent Puritan assumptions that Spurgeon adopted constitute the major influence on his interpretation of Scripture. Taken as a whole they tend toward being a comprehensive world view and function consistently, consciously and rationally throughout his hermeneutical system.

Of hardly less importance than Puritan theology in the formation of Spurgeon's approach to Scripture was the pietism of the evangelical revivals that had been assimilated by the nonconformist movement and accommodated by Spurgeon to the ideals of the Victorian era. The fusion of pietistic, nonconformist and Victorian attitudes produced a mentality that was experience-centered and conversionist in outlook. It was inclined to question new advances in the sciences and tended to identify holiness with the avoidance of certain activities and the ability to sustain intense religious feeling. The Bible was a remarkable book, almost an object of worship, able to answer all questions and meet every need. The person of Jesus Christ was often described in heroic and romantic superlatives appropriated to Victorian tastes and values. On this point it is important to note that Spurgeon in many ways epitomized the Victorian value system, its speech and its manner of life. He was a romantic, he appreciated wealth and elegance, and he spoke in flowery language. In regard to the nonconformist tradition Spurgeon's own family background and conversion dovetailed with it, and he constantly referred back to his early experiences in support of his position. Hence Spurgeon came to the Bible with his Puritan theology heavily infused with the attitudes produced by the synthesis of pietism, nonconformism and Victorianism.

The methodological assumptions that Spurgeon brings to the hermeneutical task are drawn primarily from three sources. There is first of all the various Reformation themes inherent in the Puritan tradition such as literal-historical interpretation, Christocentric "spiritualizing" and the analogy of faith. There is secondly the pietist theme of experience that is expressed by Spurgeon in his doctrine of illumination. Finally there are Spurgeon's pressing responsibilities as a preacher and pastor. Spurgeon's fundamental task was one of communication to people of all levels of feeling and intelligence. Of necessity he had to speak on the level at which he could be understood. Inevitably this demand influenced the manner in which he approached the Bible.

II. SPURGEON AND THE BIBLE

Spurgeon understands the nature of the Bible primarily in light of his Protes-

⁹The one exception was his insistence on believer's baptism.

tant orthodox heritage. It is the inspired and infallible Word of God, the very words of God, revelation itself. "This volume," he writes, "is the writing of the living God: each letter was penned with an almighty finger; each word in it dropped from the everlasting lips; each sentence was dictated by the Holy Spirit."¹⁰ Therefore it is absolutely inerrant, trustworthy and reliable. "This is the book untainted by any error; but is pure, unalloyed, perfect truth. Why? Because God wrote it."¹¹

Spurgeon marshals a number of arguments to support his view of inspiration, not the least of which is that Scripture claims such inspiration for itself. Moreover it has a grandeur of style that is above that of any mortal writing. The subjects on which Scripture speaks are beyond the human intellect; they have a singular majesty and power in them that is evident when the Word is preached. Further, there is a marvelous omniscience in Scripture that is perceived by us when it unveils our inmost souls. It proves itself to be true in our experience. The writers of Scripture are honest in an uncanny way, revealing their own faults. Throughout the Bible there is an amazing unity of subject, and the message of Scripture has a masterful simplicity. Finally, the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts confirms our faith in the Bible.¹²

Such a high view of inspiration is necessary to secure our knowledge of God and his redemptive work in Christ. Without it we would be lost. Those who do not hold this view have turned away from the faith. He writes in the preface to L. Gaussen's *Theopneustia: The Plenary Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures*, which he reissued for his students in the pastors' training college, that

the turning-point in the battle between those who hold the "faith once delivered to the saints" and their opponents lies in the true and real inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. If we have in the Word of God no infallible standard of truth, we are at sea without a compass. . . . We can have a measure of fellowship with a mistaken friend who is willing to bow before the teaching of Scripture if he can be made to understand it; but we must part company altogether with the errorist who overrides prophets and apostles, and practically regards his own inspiration as superior to theirs. We fear that such a man will before long prove himself to be an enemy of the cross of Christ, all the more dangerous because he will profess loyalty to the Lord whom he dishonors.¹³

Perhaps intuitively aware of some of the difficulties the text itself presents for such a view, Spurgeon acknowledges that

the Lord, in His Word, often used language which, though it be infallibly true in its meaning, is not after the knowledge of God, but according to the manner of men. I mean this, that the Word uses similes and analogies of which we may say that they speak humanly, and not according to the absolute truth as God sees it. As men conversing with babes use their broken speech, so doth the condescending Word.¹⁴

¹⁰*The New Park Street Pulpit* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1855), 1. 110.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 110. See also Spurgeon, *My Sermon Notes* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1887), Part IV, p. 399.

¹³Quoted by Bacon, *Spurgeon* 110.

¹⁴Spurgeon, *Messages to the Multitudes* (London: Sampson Low, Martson, 1892) 43-44.

Because Scripture is the inspired Word of God, it follows that it is authoritative in all issues of religion and life.¹⁵ Its power overrides all human words. "Never book spake like this Book; its voice, being the voice of God, is powerful and full of majesty." Further, "the Word is right, and we are wrong, wherein we agree not with it. The teachings of God's Word are infallible and must be revered as such."¹⁶

Still in keeping with the Reformed tradition of Protestant orthodoxy, Spurgeon also argues for the perspicuity of Scripture. The Bible is an understandable book and should be read and studied by all believers. Every Christian, guided by the Holy Spirit, can comprehend in its pages all that is necessary for holy living and salvation. As Spurgeon expresses it, the Bible "speaks the language of men."¹⁷

This leads to a related point—namely, that Scripture gives direction in every area of human activity. It is a practical book, "our sweet companion"¹⁸ in the daily round of life. From reading the Scriptures the believer will be strengthened to face every challenge and temptation, will be lifted out of doubt and despair, and will be able to detect theological error and gain confidence.¹⁹ Says Spurgeon: "The Word of God, as an infallible director for human life, should be sought unto by us, and it will lead us in the highway of safety."²⁰

The most important message that the Bible contains is the story of salvation by faith in Christ. The Bible is a book that speaks of Christ on nearly every page, and to catch a glimpse of him is to be transformed. Spurgeon writes:

Jesus, the Sinner's Friend, walks in the avenues of Scripture as once He traversed the plains and hills of Palestine; you can see Him still, if you have opened eyes, in the ancient prophecies; you can behold Him more clearly in the four Gospels; He opens and lays bare His inmost soul to you in the Epistles, and makes you hear the footsteps of His approaching advent in the symbols of the Apocalypse. The living Christ is in the Book; you behold His face almost in every page; and, consequently, it is a book that can talk.²¹

Still another aspect of his understanding of the nature of the Bible is its elevation to the place of the sacred. Because it enshrines the words of God and the living heart of Christ, it nearly becomes an object of worship. It is essential to our eternal welfare as the mediator of God's saving word. As such it functions as a visible symbol of our salvation. Its words evoke religious sentiments and devotional impulses. Frequently the issue is not so much their understanding as their ritualistic reiteration. Certain phrases, from the *King James Version*, repeated over

¹⁵Carlile, *Spurgeon* 145-146.

¹⁶Spurgeon, *Messages* 34, 47.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁹*The New Park Street Pulpit* (1859), 4. 60-61.

²⁰*Messages* 32.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 35.

and over again, carry the full force of sacred tradition and "bless the soul." Spurgeon writes that it is "blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until at last you come to talk in Scriptural language; and your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline, and the very essence of the Bible flows from you."²²

Such statements are more than poetic expression of the value of the Bible to the Christian community. The Bible's place in Spurgeon's thought is in many ways analogous to that of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin in some forms of Roman Catholicism. Like the Virgin, the Bible is the living symbol and mediator of our salvation. And like her freedom from all contagion of human imperfection, the Bible has the qualities of purity and perfection.²³ "O Bible," Spurgeon says in almost prayerful tones, "it cannot be said of any other book, that it is perfect and pure; but of thee we can declare all wisdom is gathered up in thee, without a particle of folly."²⁴ Spurgeon exhorts us "to love the Word of God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength; with the full force of our nature, we are to embrace it; all our warmest affections are to be bound up with it."²⁵

Thus Spurgeon views the Bible as the inspired and authoritative Word of God that believers are able to read with understanding as they seek direction for holy living and salvation. Because its words are the words of God and its essential message the living Christ himself, it should be revered and loved. But how is this sacred book to be interpreted? What means should be utilized in order to best understand its life-giving content? Spurgeon suggests at least five guidelines for correct interpretation.

Rule number one, according to Spurgeon, is to understand each passage in its "first sense"—that is, its literal or obvious meaning. "The first sense of the passage," he writes, "must never be drowned in the outflow of your imagination; it must be distinctly declared and allowed to hold the first rank; your accommodation of it must never thrust out the original and native meaning, or even push it into the background."²⁶ A passage should not be strained. One should be honest with the Word, avoiding any perversion.²⁷ Spurgeon himself interpreted the text quite literally. He took its promises at their face value and used them in his personal prayer life and his preaching. He understood the early chapters of Genesis as describing "what actually happened" and resisted the inroads of science that called for re-evaluation of the traditional view. He says: "When men will not receive the Scripture testimony concerning God's creation, straightway they begin to form theories that are a thousand times more ridiculous than they have endeavored to make the Bible account of it."²⁸ In another context discussing the same

²²Quoted by Bacon, *Spurgeon* 109.

²³See J. Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation*, p. 204.

²⁴*Park Street*, 1. 112.

²⁵*Messages* 31-32.

²⁶*Lectures to My Students* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1881), First Series, p. 108.

²⁷*Commenting and the Commentaries* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1876) 30.

²⁸*Park Street*, 4. 59.

subject he writes: "What is science? Another name for the ignorance of man."²⁹ To say that Spurgeon insisted that primary attention should be given to the literal sense does not imply that he accepted a critical historical approach to Scripture. He does acknowledge the need to study the historical situation in which a book was written, the context in which a particular text may appear, and the author's intent in writing, but he would never allow for any critical questions to threaten the seamless garment of Scripture. To the would-be critic he throws out the taunt: "But this is the Word of God; come, search ye critics, and find a flaw; examine it from its Genesis to its Revelation, and find error."³⁰

Nor does a commitment to the primacy of the literal sense disallow "spiritualizing." As a second guideline for the interpretation of Scripture, Spurgeon describes the method and application of a "spiritual" hermeneutic. Much of what he says on this point is said in the context of lectures on homiletics to his students. Preachers, as they prepare their sermons, should interpret Scripture with reference to the spiritual meaning. "Within limit, my brethren," he says to young preachers, "be not afraid to spiritualize, or to take singular texts. Continue to look out passages of Scripture and not only give their plain meaning, as you are bound to do, but also draw from them meanings which may not lie upon their surface."³¹ The content of the sermons, he cautions, must always be congruous to the text, but this should not limit a wise utilization of spiritualizing. He writes:

The discourse should spring out of the text as a rule, and the more evidently it does so the better; but at all times, to say the least, it should have a very close relationship thereto. In the matter of spiritualizing and accommodation very large latitude is to be allowed; but liberty must not degenerate into license, and there must always be a connection, and something more than a remote connection—a real relationship between the sermon and the text.³²

In order to prevent liberty from degenerating into license, Spurgeon defines the legitimate range for spiritualizing. In the OT the best application of the principle is in typology. The experiences of the Israelites from the exodus to the exile provide a rich and fertile crop from which to harvest "spiritual" lessons concerning Christ and the believer's life. The spiritual principle can be applied to any part of Scripture in the form of metaphors and allegories. Still another manner of spiritualizing is to generalize from minute and separate facts the great universal principles of the faith. From an isolated and ignored text the interpreter, with the exercise of creative imagination, can draw out a profound truth. Also "the parables of our Lord in their expounding and enforcement afford the amplest scope for a mature and disciplined fancy; and if these have all passed before you, the miracles still remain, rich in symbolical teaching."³³ Spurgeon seems to have no qualms about using the text itself as a pretext for making a larger and more signi-

²⁹*Messages* 286.

³⁰*Park Street*, 1. 111.

³¹*Lectures*, First Series, p. 103.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 74.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 110.

ficant point. This practice is justified because of the "sacred" character of Scripture, a quality of the Bible that gives it the power of speaking at different levels.

A third guiding concept in the interpretation of Scripture is the analogy of faith. Scripture is to be interpreted in terms of its central message. The whole is to interpret the part, a key passage an incidental one. "No one text," Spurgeon explains, "is to be exalted above the plain analogy of faith; and no solitary expression is to shape our theology for us."³⁴ Because the essential content of Scripture is Jesus Christ, the *analogia fidei* leads to a Christocentric interpretation. Spurgeon finds references to Christ throughout Scripture. A notable example of his Christocentric interpretation is his acceptance of the traditional interpretation of the Song of Solomon. This Hebrew love poem is understood by Spurgeon as an allegory of Christ's love for the Church and more personally as an account of the believer's love relationship with his Lord. In pious sentiment and Victorian language, he draws three lessons from the text "I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys" (Song 2:1): (1) the exceeding delightfulness of our Lord; (2) the sweet variety of his delightfulness; and (3) the exceeding freedom of his delightfulness.³⁵

A fourth principle of Biblical interpretation is the need for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The faithful believer, who is open to the Spirit's illuminating power, will be led not only to a correct understanding of Scripture but also to its living relevance. "As for believers," he writes, "the Holy Spirit often sets the Word on a blaze while they are studying it. The letters were at one time before us as mere letters; but the Holy Ghost suddenly came upon them, and they spake with tongues. . . . God the Holy Spirit vivifies the letter with His presence, and then it is to us a living Word, indeed."³⁶ It is the Spirit of God who "delights to open up the Word to those who seek his instruction."³⁷

Finally, as a fifth principle in Spurgeon's hermeneutical approach there is what might be called the pragmatic test. An interpretation of a passage will be confirmed as true if it produces results. He applied this notion both to the individual believer and to the preacher. The Christian will find a scriptural interpretation to be true if it works in experience—that is, if it safely guides one through the trials and temptations of life. The preacher will discover an interpretation of a text authenticating itself if it produces certain effects in the congregation. If it is a correct interpretation, people will be converted and lives will be changed. When the Bible is rightly and sincerely preached and received, it carries its own illumination and power.³⁸

III. A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

There is much to commend in Spurgeon's approach to the Bible. His commit-

³⁴*Commenting* 31.

³⁵*Sermon Notes*, Part II, p. 204.

³⁶*Messages* 36.

³⁷*Commenting* 32.

³⁸Carlile, *Spurgeon* 146.

ment to its inspiration and authority is in keeping with the best of the Church's theological tradition. Also on the positive side is his insistence on giving primacy to the literal-historical meaning in an interpretation. While not always consistent in applying this principle, he did keep it central in his exegesis. A related positive point is his continual stress on the need to understand the background of each book of the Bible and the specific context of each passage to be interpreted.

Moreover it is important to note the place given to the Bible and its central message in his preaching. If God has allowed himself to be known in history and uniquely so in the Christ event, and if the Bible is the record of this disclosure, then the Bible should be given the place of priority in the preaching of the Church. Spurgeon's preaching was always Biblical and Christ-centered. Though some may disagree with his view of the nature and interpretation of the Bible, few would question that he sincerely and eloquently proclaimed its central message.

Equally important is the place that he gave to faith as the necessary starting point for a true comprehension of the Bible. Only the person of faith, guided by the Holy Spirit, is able to truly understand Scripture, which is to say that only the person of faith whose heart is open is able to receive the Biblical message. This person alone is able to perceive God's love. The one who stands outside of faith may possess information about the contents of the Bible but will miss its essential message.

Yet these positive features that characterize Spurgeon's understanding of the Bible should not mislead us concerning its overall adequacy. His position fails for a number of reasons. Perhaps the primary weakness of his view is his elevation of the Bible to a near object of worship. In addition to faith in Jesus Christ, the Christian must also have faith in the Book. Faith has taken on another object and, in the process, faces the possibility of being corrupted. There is, for example, the potential danger of focusing exclusive attention on the statements of Scripture themselves rather than on their subject. The door has been opened to pronouncing the words sacred as well as that to which they point. In such a view, revelation begins to lose its historical rootage. It becomes overly propositional. God has dictated a book, and it assumes more importance than his redemptive activity in history.

Furthermore the sacred Book cannot be subjected to historical criticism. There is no need. It is infallible. Its authors were not adversely affected by their historical circumstances. God spoke through their personalities and situations to insure the inerrancy of his Word. Hence an overemphasis on the dogma of verbal inspiration means for Spurgeon a complete resistance to historical scrutiny. But such a view is surely a retreat from all that is sound in Biblical scholarship. Critical questions cannot be totally ignored. Historical study is the only way we have of understanding what has happened in the past. If faith affirms that God has acted in the past, then it is a violation of our faith not to study in the most thorough and accurate way possible the records of this activity. The doctrine of verbal inspiration, as held by Spurgeon, is partially self-defeating because it does not allow honest historical study of the very historical events that it claims the Bible infallibly records. How is it possible to understand history without studying history? Surely what happened is important—and if there is confidence that it did

happen, what is there to fear from historical investigation?³⁹

This general lack of a historical understanding of the Bible leads Spurgeon to accept principles of interpretation that may lead to a misunderstanding of the meaning of Scripture. He of course does not intentionally distort the Bible's meaning, nor does he miss the sense of most of its passages and/or fail to comprehend its basic message. It does mean, however, that when he "spiritualizes" a passage he obscures the original intention of the author and fails to state its primary meaning. This does not imply an exclusion in principle of the possibility of messianic prophecy nor a Christological interpretation of certain OT passages, but it is necessary to insist on the importance of historical study in determining the primary meaning of all Scripture. The application of the historical method does not prohibit the posture of faith but serves as a check on the intruding biases that every interpreter possesses.

Spurgeon's principle of the pragmatic test for the correctness of an interpretation is really not fundamental to his hermeneutical position and therefore should not be criticized as if it were. But as it stands, it allows a passage to be interpreted in as many different ways as there are emotional reactions. The sluice gates are opened to the floodwaters of subjectivity. There is no objective and historical test possible. If an interpretation "blesses the soul" or produces a convert, then it is true whether it has anything to do with the meaning of the passage or not. This principle can lead to flagrant violations of the obvious meaning of the text. While a sovereign God may overrule preaching based on exegesis of this sort, allowing for lives to be changed for the better, this certainly does not justify its use.

In the final analysis, Spurgeon's understanding of the nature and interpretation of the Bible does not adequately serve this generation of evangelical Christians who have come to accept the best of current Biblical scholarship while holding concurrently to the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Such a position, held in the spirit of openness and dialogue rather than defensive retreat, is surely the best one for the evangelical Church today.

³⁹Spurgeon might respond to such a criticism that he, too, believes that historical study is necessary to an adequate interpretation of the Bible, but that the Bible should not be subject to "other authorities"—e.g., the historical-critical method.