

John Clifford (1836-1923): Irrepressible Liberal

Thomas J. Nettles

Thomas J. Nettles has served as Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary since 1997. He has taught previously at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (1976-1982), Mid-America Seminary (1982-1988), and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (1989-1997). Dr. Nettles is a prolific author and has written extensively about Baptist history.

Introduction

William Carey died in June of 1834. Just prior to that, the notable Baptist Pastor and historian Joseph Ivimey had died in February 1834. Robert Hall Jr. preceded both in his presence before the Lord in 1831. Hall had preached a sermon on the death of John Ryland, Jr., in 1825 that set all of these deaths in perspective when he noted the strength and character of those who were passing so quickly from the scene.

That denomination of Christians, of which he [Ryland] was so long a distinguished ornament, will especially lay this providence to heart. Our hands are weakened this day; and if the glory is not departed from us, it is at least eclipsed and obscured. We have been visited with stroke upon stroke. Our brightest lights have been successively extinguished; and in vain do we look around for a Beddome, a Booth, a Fuller, or a Ryland; names which would have given lustre to any denomination, and were long the glory of ours.¹

Hall's own influence generated massive admiration, not only for him personally, but for dissenters in general. His eloquence, his masterful and courageous stance on important social issues such as freedom of the press, his magnificent defense of the character, integrity, and cause of historic English Dissent, his energetic support of the Baptist Missionary Society, and his patient perseverance under the pain and vagaries of poor health garnered accolades and recognitions of greatness from which Baptists benefited immensely.

His greatness, however, failed to hide,

and perhaps contributed to, his chief weakness. Hall's power could compensate for the intrinsic unworthiness of a cause thus granting it a recommendation far beyond its merits. His insistence on the preeminence and unifying effects of the central issues of Protestant theology, his zeal for the personal discovery of truth from the whole Bible without being hampered by shallow assent to narrower, and merely human, formulas, and his zeal for the practical and moral in Christian thought created inattention to important aspects of Baptist witness. Zeal for doctrinal distinctiveness, the positive usefulness of confessions, and the conserving power of theological expansiveness suffered severe blows from Hall's overall influence and formed the climate for the energetic modernism of John Clifford.

While concerned about doctrinal issues and willing to be forthright in his defense of fundamental teachings, Hall steered his course most closely to the side of practical Christianity. As a convinced advocate of holistic Christianity, Hall would warn against overlooking "the distinguishing doctrines of the gospel under the pretence of advancing the interests of morality" just as clearly as he would eschew a tendency to "inculcate those doctrines, without habitually adverting to their purifying and transforming influence." His most ardent energies, however, centered on "the frequent and earnest inculcation of the practical precepts of the gospel, in an accurate delineation of the Christian temper, in a specific and minute exposition of the per-

sonal, social and relative duties” enforced by both the “endearing” as well as the “alarming” motives of Scripture.²

This concern for the practical, stated most forcefully in his resistance to antinomianism, found a complementary partner in his defense of open communion among the churches. This defense involved an interaction with how far error is to be tolerated in Christian communion. “If, amidst the infinite diversity of opinions,” Hall argues, “each society deems it necessary to render its own peculiarities the basis of union, as though the design of Christians, in forming themselves into a church, were not to exhibit the great principles of the gospel, but to give publicity and effect to party distinctions, all hope of restoring Christian harmony and unanimity must be abandoned.” Hall did not doubt the “pernicious influence of error in general” and he agreed that the “formal denial of saving essential truth” constituted reason for refusal of fellowship.³ In issues not fundamental to salvation, however, Hall found no reason for division. An heir of Bunyan on this issue, Hall envisions a palpable absurdity in a system that invests “every little Baptist teacher with the prerogative of repelling from his communion, a Howe, a Leighton, or a Brainerd, whom the Lord of glory will welcome to his presence.” Hall found such a claimed prerogative at least as revolting as transubstantiation.⁴ “Religious parties,” he had learned by much observation, “imply a tacit compact, not merely to sustain the fundamental truths of revelation, . . . but also to uphold the incidental peculiarities by which they are distinguished.”⁵

Though in the preceding context he spoke specifically of infant baptism as a peripheral matter, not an essential doctrine, not fundamental, he spread the umbrella

more broadly in another context. In writing a preface to a republication of his father’s remarkably helpful book *Help to Zion’s Travelers*, the admiring but independent son issued a caveat.

If there be any impression, in the following treatise, which implies that the questions at issue betwixt the Calvinists and Arminians are of the nature of *fundamentals*, (of which, however, I am not aware,) I beg leave, as far as they are concerned, to express my explicit dissent; being fully satisfied that upon either system the foundations of human hope remain unshaken, and that there is nothing in the contrariety of views entertained on these subjects, which ought to obstruct the most cordial affection and harmony among Christians.⁶

The abridgment of importance in these historic confessional distinctions uncovers a tendency in Hall that enlarged in Baptist life throughout the nineteenth century. An ordination sermon in which Hall gives adoring commendation to the beauty and power of the central Christian doctrines as well as the minister’s unmitigated obligation to focus on truth includes an implicit sweeping away of any value in confessional fidelity. To a strong admonition to make personal acquaintance with the entire corpus of Scripture the foundation of a powerful and refreshing ministry, Hall adds the following personal injunction.

You, I am persuaded, will not satisfy yourself with the study of Christianity in narrow jejune abridgments and systems, but contemplate it, in its utmost extent, as it subsists in the sacred oracles; and, in investigating these, you will permit your reason and conscience an operation, as free and unfettered, as if none had examined them before. The neglect of this produces, too often, an artificial scarcity, where some of the choicest provisions of the household are

exploded or overlooked.⁷

While admirable as a commendation of the whole Scripture and as an admonition for personal responsibility in making discoveries of the comprehensiveness of its truth, the implicit isolationism and denigration of the insights of other centuries as well as the imputation of aridity and dullness to the systematic approach of confessions bore poisonous fruit. Personal study of Scripture need not be opposite to the gifts of others nor need it see confessions as the enemy of personal knowledge and growth.

Hall's views became more prominent through the century. Graham Hughes notes the powerful influence of Hall in his acknowledgment that "the ultimate adoption of the principle of Open Communion by such a large number of the Baptist churches was due to Hall's advocacy of the practice." His mediating stance toward Calvinism also settled into the Baptist fellowship, so that as it receded from hyper-Calvinism, "Many of them, unfortunately, continued to recede until they had no theology at all."⁸

As stated in his preface to "On Terms of Communion," Hall did not expect a sudden revolution in the "sentiments and practice" of Baptists, but would be satisfied if his work, along with other factors, would "ultimately contribute to so desirable an issue."⁹ At least one individual, John Clifford, seemed overjoyed to put Hall's inclusive policy to the test. Though he relativized, or rejected, doctrinal issues that Hall probably would have deemed fundamental, Clifford's generation found his exuberance and enthusiasm irresistible so that he incarnated the opportunity coveted by Hall to "cultivate a cordial union with our fellow Christians,"¹⁰ even though the

definition of a Christian became much more loosely defined.

The Life of Clifford

In the year that Carey and Ivimey died, Charles Haddon Spurgeon was born. Two years and four months after the birth of Spurgeon, John Clifford was born the first of seven children to Samuel Clifford and Mary Stenson Clifford in the village of Sawley about ten miles from Nottingham. His birthdate, October 16, 1836, came about twenty years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Clifford heard from his parents the terrible conditions through which the Midlands passed in those post-war decades. "I was a factory child," he recalled, "and know something of the terrible conditions of old England at that time." "Work was slavery for the toilers who crowded into the factory towns of the North and of the Midlands." Wages were at a point "fathoms below the demands of mere subsistence," crime was rampant, riots devastated necessary implements for life, the government was not merely distrusted but loathed, poverty was unbearable, workers had no freedom and had little say about their own lives. "George III was mad and George IV was immoral." Workers' meetings were illegal and cause for imprisonment, journalists were prosecuted, the press was not free, hanging was punishment for petty offenses, nonconformists were persecuted and ridiculed and could legally gather for no other purpose than for worship. Such was the description of life deeply imbedded in the consciousness of Clifford as he learned from his parents the repressive conditions of the years just prior to his birth.¹¹

His early education lacked the inspiration, energy, and enthusiasm later so markedly characteristic of Clifford's intellectual

aspirations. Stern and unsympathetic schoolmasters turned much pain into little learning. Clifford's innate drive, however, seized the few sparks of encouragement available in such situations and found hope and desire to go as far as he could in learning. He felt particularly indebted to Mr. Godler of Beeston.

His school experience gave way quickly to the tyranny of child labor. Before his eleventh birthday Clifford went to work in a lace factory where he said, "I have never forgotten the cruel impressions I received there of men and work."¹² He arose at four in the morning and worked fourteen-hour days often doing work that was so repetitive that he found space and place to read while carrying out his duties.

Though his father was a Calvinist and his mother the heir of Puritan stock, the Cliffords attended a General Baptist church in Sawley and upon removal to Beeston joined the General Baptist cause there under the pastorate of Richard Pike. The *General Baptist Magazine*, for which he was later to serve as editor, was part of the staple literary diet of the Cliffords. His paternal grandmother was a Methodist and taught the young Clifford about "the universality of the love of God, the universality of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the universality of the work of the Holy Spirit."¹³

Clifford's conversion came at fourteen years of age. After "five or six months of misery and wretchedness," and continued attempts on his part to get rid of "conscious guilt," he experienced, in a moment, "spiritual emancipation." His fetters of guilt shattered with one stroke and "into the liberty of the children of God I leaped as in an instant." With an enlightened grasp of the "simplicity of God's marvellous plan of salvation," Clifford "grasped the hand

of the Father led thither by Jesus Christ."¹⁴

His baptism on June 16, 1851, became a moment of enlivening of conscience for Clifford. He had lifted the flag for Jesus and everyone knew it. Any wrong attitude or action now would reflect on the church that had accepted his testimony and allowed him to share its public testimony. He was well known in the factory and felt responsible for the reputation of the church and the gospel among his fellow workers.

If I were untrue, false or dishonest in anything, I damaged my church; if I lost my temper, I injured that Church; if I was not genial and kindly and considerate, I injured that Church; and this consciousness drove me to God, so that I might be kept through the day from doing anything that would discredit Christ, whose name I had professed, and the Church into which He had brought me. I say for myself, that was distinctly the fact.¹⁵

Soon Clifford felt moved toward embracing the greatly circumscribed opportunities of a Baptist, non-conformist, pastor. Mother, grandmother, and three uncles all predisposed him to this calling. His own intellectual curiosity, moral courage, deep sense of social righteousness, and fiery spirit seemed perfect for the task as he envisioned it. His pastor greatly encouraged him, tutored him in sermon preparation and delivery, and saw to it that he had ample opportunity to test his gifts. Eventually, Richard Pike led his church to recommend Clifford as a suitable candidate for the ministry to the Baptist Academy in Leicester.

Preparatory to the intellectual and spiritual challenge of school, Clifford made an interesting journey of soul into an unexpected religious eddy. Clifford considered Ralph Waldo Emerson "one of the friends of my youth."¹⁶ He discovered him in 1854,

the year before he entered college, and carried him with him "about the streets and along the little lanes of the village in which I was brought up." He speaks of Emerson in overtones of veneration. He visited Emerson's home as a "reverential pilgrim." Emerson is a "seer" who glows with the "fire of the Divine indwelling" and speaks of "the deep things of God, of the infinite, eternal Over-Soul" and the "incalculable and enormous claims of the human spirit." His voice is "oracular" like the prophet Isaiah who had a vision of the Holy, and like Elijah "whose foot stands firm upon the solid earth, but whose head is in the presence of the Eternal." Emerson is a prophet of revolt, the ultimate Protestant who stirs a person to fight against tyranny wherever it exists, whether in the masses or the despot. He is a prophet of self-reliance. He proclaims the "integrity, the independence, and the sufficient resources of the human soul." Every thought of humanity, every achievement, the writings of Shakespeare, the philosophy of Plato, the soaring delights of spiritual pleasure of the mystic all belong to each human soul for the "Over-Soul [is] penetrating us; surrounding us as an atmosphere; going through all the doors of our being, and taking possession of our entire life." The door of infinity is open to us. "Trust in ourselves is trust in God who is in us; and trust in that God who is in us is trust in ourselves, and with this whole-souled reliance upon the Eternal we may thus come into possession of resources that are adequate for all we try to attempt, for all we ought to do, and ought to be." Emerson gives us cheer in our soul and true optimism and is pre-eminently "a preacher of the supremacy of the spiritual." It is true that he does not adequately understand sin and our racial participation in it, but only because he

came from six generations of Puritans who lived holy, saintly lives and bequeathed to him a disposition freighted with serenity, calm, and beautiful peacefulness. He preaches what Jesus Christ preaches and what Paul preaches. Finding his Unitarian upbringing too narrow, exclusive and doctrinaire, he left it behind. In spite of phrases he uses, however, we must see him as a "believer in God and in Jesus Christ" and must learn to see his life as one "supremely Christian." Should Emerson go to hell, according to a Father Tayler quoted by Clifford, "there would be a change in the climate speedily." Emerson "belonged not to the lower but to the higher" as indicated by his "superlative goodness and Christ-likeness."

The man had been steering Christward all his life, and although he could not take up phrases that were current in the churches concerning Christ, but he was breathing His spirit, repeating His acts, and influencing the life of the world in a Christlike way. Do not judge him by phrases, but judge him by the general drift and tendency of his utterances, of his life, and you will find that he belonged to the great company who are moved and stirred by the Spirit of God.¹⁷

Through the touch of such a man Clifford received "healing and emancipation" from the wounds of errors that were "Playing the despot" and wrecking his life. Emerson's work went into his conscience and consciousness as the "utterance of the divine," full of authority, "full of the breath of God, quickening as with the inspiration of the Almighty." A balm flowed from Emerson; Clifford was "quickened by his teaching." "I saw not his form," Clifford testified, "but I have felt his power." He read and re-read Emerson in the same way he read his Bible and as a result he found

that his Bible was a “more helpful book from what I had discovered in Emerson.”

Bolstered by his Emersonian matrix of religious feeling and the liberating idea of academic life in Leicester as opposed to factory life in Beeston, off to college went Clifford. He struggled through a series of doubts concerning the content and authority of the Christian faith and made a resolution to love the right and true and eschew the wrong and false wherever that might lead him. Even if there were no God, right and truth surpass wrong and error in the measure of a man’s life. God purified him in that six-month intellectual trial, so Clifford believed.¹⁸ It appears that part of that purification involved an adoption of historical criticism, an openness to the veracity of empirical science as corrective of biblical cosmology and history, and a resistance to systematized categories of theological truth. To the end of his days he contended that the spirit of creeds stood in antagonism to the spirit of Christ.

Clifford excelled in his studies, preached hundreds of times, and took advantage of opportunities to hear others preach. In company with others he heard the young London sensation, Charles H. Spurgeon, preach and was completely absorbed both in the manner and content of his delivery. At the close of his second year, Market Harborough church, in which he served as a supply preacher, asked for his full-time services. On the advice of Joseph Hoadby, Clifford declined, but six months later he did respond enthusiastically to a call to the Praed Street-Westbourne Park congregation in London. He continued his education for eight years at the University of London. Marchant summarizes:

He graduated B. A. in 1861, following it in 1862 with his B. Sc. with honours in Logic, Moral Philosophy,

Geology, and Paleontology. In 1864 he graduated M. A., coming out first in his year, and in 1866 he took the Laws Degree with honours in the principles of Legislation. The Geological Society made him a Fellow in 1879, and in 1883 he was awarded the honorary D. D. of Bates College, United States.¹⁹

Clifford remained at this church for his entire ministry. Its growth and expansion of activities made necessary enlargement of space. In 1872 Charles H. Spurgeon preached at the dedication of enlarged and renovated facilities at Praed Street; five years later, Spurgeon preached to an overflow congregation at the dedication of a new facility at Westbourne Park in Paddington. For fifty-seven years this congregation grew and gave witness to Clifford’s vision of Christian discipleship and evangelism until the conclusion of his ministry on August 29, 1915. He continued as Pastor Emeritus for the remaining eight years of his life. He died at a Baptist Union Council meeting on November 20, 1923. After speaking to a resolution of encouragement to Dr. J. H. Shakespeare and while listening raptly to reports on his own proposal of a Personal Evangelism crusade, he died in his chair at the Council Table.

The Thought of Clifford

Some remarkable aspects of his ministry must be summarized. First, some aspects of his cultural and political savvy and forcefulness must come under review. Then, his shaping influence on Baptist thinking about doctrine must be examined, if not in detail, at least carefully and thoughtfully.

Clifford the Social Prophet

Clifford maintained an amazingly active involvement in the political issues confronting England. Friend and antagonist

alike knew that he spoke from an uncompromisingly clear conscience informed by his Baptist free-church mentality and his fierce loyalty to the common working class in England. He had nothing commendatory to say about the liquor traffic. It built its fortune on the health and souls of "hungry mother and starving little children."²⁰ In 1910, Clifford noted that a slump in the Scotch whiskey trade accompanied a "most gratifying improvement in the moral habits of the people."²¹ Even in World War I he insisted, "I do not believe that we shall conquer our lesser enemy on the continent of Europe until we have dealt a destructive blow at the confessedly greater enemy of alcohol."²² In the interests of social virtue Clifford hammered away at the need "to prohibit the drink trade because that trade is the foe at once of the home and of the State."²³

He led in the fight against the Education Bill that required, at the cost of both taxation and repression of dissenters, Anglican religious education in the schools. After it first passed in 1902 Clifford made an instant analysis that he stuck to until his death. He called it "a conspiracy against the liberties of Englishmen, a successful effort to hand over the children of this country to be trained in the 'principles of the Established Church' and of Romanism at the expense of the whole people." The Parliamentary procedures manipulated by A. J. Balfour were worthy of Charles I and "a ghastly travesty of legislation." This action will not help but hurt the Church of England as it will emerge as an object of "general suspicion," in the opinions of its adherents "defamed and degraded," and by reflective men outside its pale "scorned and condemned" for its "duplicity and cunning."²⁴

His encouragement of and leadership in

the Passive Resistance Movement, a controversial stance even in the eyes of many admiring Dissenters, to these unfair education measures led to his being summoned before the magistrates fifty-seven times by 1922. He lived consistently by a public vow that those who sought to make him conform to government compulsion of taxation "to pay for the propagation of . . . church doctrines" would never taste success. "Against that I have battled," he reminded his people, "and if you try to make me [conform] you will discover that you have for once undertaken an impossibility."²⁵ His actions on this front gained his inclusion in a book entitled *Modern Baptist Heroes and Martyrs* in an article written by A. T. Robertson. Robertson judged that Clifford was "one of the greatest living statesmen in his grasp of the fundamental questions of religious liberty."²⁶

He led in a vigorous, and unpopular, opposition to the Boer War, believing it enshrined the worst of greed, imperialism, prejudice, superiority, and stupidity as elements of national virtue. While it raged he remonstrated against it in the whole and in its parts. Particularly onerous were the concentration camps, effects of a destructive and arrogant policy that made him boil over with "indignation against the iniquity" of the camps. In his New Year's address for 1904, he scorned the "tricks and trifling that led us into it" as well as the "follies and stupidities that marked the preparation for it." He lamented the "enormous financial burdens placed upon the masses of the people by this government of 'muddle and mess and make-believe.'" He inserted an urgent admonition that "It rests with you to build up on the ruins of South Africa a contented, tranquil, self-governing, and prosperous country."²⁷

Later, however, he supported the par-

ticipation of England in World War I, calling it a “war to make peace eternal” while considering Kaiser William “the most corrupt and corrupting, deceptive and diabolical force the world has yet known.”²⁸ The young men who left his church for combat went “from strong compulsion of duty to God and men” to oppose “armed despotism and fiendish diabolism and all unrighteousness.” Clifford exhibited no naivete concerning the horror, sacrifice, slaughter, barbarity, and cruelty of war. We must work for its abolition; wars must cease. The present cause transcended all that, however.

We are sure that we are not sacrificing millions of young, strong and heroic fellow-citizens for anything less than to secure justice for every man in every land so that we may breathe it as common air. We are not enduring the agonies of this long strife for perishable wealth and fleeting fame, or for this modern material civilization which has been built up with pride and vain show, and is now being judged and condemned by God, but for the rightful liberty of the spirits of men and of nations, for that self-government of political groups without which they cannot be strong, progressive and fruitful, and for the deliverance of men in all lands from the menace of a debasing political servitude, which is fatal to the greatness and purity, the peace and usefulness of the life which God has given us.²⁹

When the war ceased and the Treaty of Versailles took its place in the history of international relations, Clifford showed his uncanny insight by lamenting the overly-severe repression, even the vengeful spirit manifest toward Germany, in the peace settlement. In addition, the severe suffering of Austria, Serbia, Armenia, Hungary, Russia and virtually all other nations gave Clifford, most often an optimist due to

mental predisposition and theological outlook, cause for deep despair.

The events of the last year embrace the whole round earth. Nothing that concerns humanity was left out. The war was omnipresent, like the air. Britain was merely a drop in the bucket, and our isles a little thing. All peoples felt the shattering, torturing, diabolical pressure; feel it now, and will feel it this year and the next; your children, aye, and their children, will be drawn within its widening circles. It is absolutely without parallel in the enormity of the wrongdoing that started it, in the intensity and range of the suffering it caused, and in the calamitous effects it has produced and will produce throughout this century.³⁰

Clifford went on to quote with reluctant agreement the observation of a Dr. Dillon, “Every Government is making its policy subservient to the needs of that future war which is universally looked upon as an unavoidable outcome of the Versailles Peace.” Little wonder that many held Dr. Clifford’s observations as oracular.

He argued for women’s suffrage and equality before the Law in all ways. When the “suffragettes” finally used aggressive and disruptive means to gain a hearing in 1908, Clifford refused to condemn them outright but stated that “the grounds of their plea cannot in my judgment be successfully assailed.” He even recognized that sometime governments will listen only when violence occurs. Their actions had set the cause of women back, however, and Clifford was “so anxious that women should soon take their full responsibility for the government of the people,” that he advised the suffragettes to return to “political sanity and a just consideration of the interest and claims of large public meetings.”³¹ When the Sex Disqualifications Act passed in 1919, Clifford remarked that

“woman is on the march, as I have been saying with a glad heart for many years.” The magistrates’ bench, parliament, and the legal profession were now open and “before long the barrier of sex will be entirely abolished.”³²

Clifford literally despised the House of Lords. He referred to it as “that supreme anachronism, that ridiculous relic of feudalism.” Their place in the government, particularly the right of veto, he called “this tragedy of aristocratic rule.” He called on progressive thinkers to “fight like grim death to bring this Goliath to the ground.” Again he asserted, “We must get rid, once and for all of the hereditary principle and of the power of veto.”³³ This Free-Churchman looked with gall and disdain on the reality that “the House of Lords is the final court of the Anglican Church.” As such, naturally but regrettably, “it is its business to defend the property, the monopolies and privileges of that State institution.” Indeed, the Lords not only protect but rule the Church and even worse, “it rules us; we cannot legislate for ourselves; the way is blocked.” The people of England, the most capable and cultured nation on the earth, “must submit to their dictation, and yet they are not the chosen representatives of the people.”³⁴ When the power of veto was removed in 1910, Clifford thought it was progress but not enough. “Every title is retained in all its brilliance, and no lord is lowered by the tenth of an inch in the social scale. The successors of the fishermen of Galilee are still ‘my lords,’ and the Archbishop of Canterbury still takes precedence of the officers of State.”³⁵

Clifford was deeply concerned about international relations. Though he recognized its weaknesses, Clifford gave immense energy to the support of the League of Nations. It is necessary, he

believed, “to secure and to maintain as far as possible to our fractious human nature the permanent peace of the politically organized peoples of the earth.” Every year he analyzed steps toward freedom in numbers of nations. Russia, India, Armenia, South Africa, Turkey, Ireland, Italy, and any place where issues of human freedom and the rights of self-government were in the balance made Clifford’s agenda for discussion. “The place of right as against might,” stirred his soul as he cheered on those who would “ask for the rightful share of grown men in the government of their country.”³⁶

He had great admiration for the free institutions of the United States, and believed that its potential for good was virtually infinite. As early as 1903, Clifford severely criticized the British government’s tendency toward “alliances with Continental despotisms.” He distrusted military empires” which rested upon their “phalanxes of drilled and enforced fighters.” No matter what one might think of the Kaiser personally, Clifford insisted that “the true faith is this, the union and the communion of England with the men and women of the United States.” They speak the tongue of Shakespeare and Milton, breath the same free spirit and “incarnate it in free institutions.” English ideas of freedom have been developed and applied in ways in the United States “not yet possible to us.” “Not then, linked gunboat to gunboat with imperial autocrats like Kaiser Wilhelm must we march into the future, but joined soul with soul with our alert, keen-witted, self-governing, freedom-loving cousins of the great United States.”³⁷

This admiration only strengthened over the next decade and a half. Clifford hailed Woodrow Wilson as one of the greatest figures of modern history. The entry of the

United States into World War I, Clifford announced as “the transcendent event of 1917.” As marvelously gifted at hyperbole as he was at righteously poignant invective, Clifford asserted, “There is nothing to compare with it in all the annals of the past.” After having tried brilliantly and appropriately to avoid war, Wilson and his aids saw the true despotism and tyrannical ambitions of Kaiser Wilhelm and set aside the Monroe Doctrine for the sake of truth and freedom.

The descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers, whilst loving peace with all their hearts, loved liberty more, and therefore they came to do battle on behalf of a world menaced with universal servitude, and to uphold their faith in the principle asserted by their President that “no right exists to hand peoples about from potentate to potentate as if they were property.”

With all our hearts and with one voice we welcome the modern Pilgrims, and give thanks to the God of the Pilgrims for sending them to Europe in this hour of the world’s need.³⁸

Clifford as a Theological Shaper *Doctrinal Minimalism*

The confidence Baptists had in Clifford as an energetic spokesman and representative of issues of freedom and conscience unfolded in his election to several conspicuous offices. The General Baptists appointed him as editor of *The General Baptist Magazine* in 1870, a responsibility in which he continued for fourteen years. In spite of the general knowledge of his highly personalized doctrinal positions and his growing reputation as a controversial political figure, he served as vice-president of the Baptist Union in England in 1887 when the Downgrade controversy broke and as president in the next year during an attempt to resolve it amicably. He was

prime mover also in the eventual merging of General Baptists and Particular Baptists in the Baptist Union of 1891. Clifford was the first, and unanimous, choice for president of the Baptist World Alliance in 1905 when it met in London. The Evangelical Free Church Council in England elected him as president in 1898.

His election as editor of the *General Baptist Magazine* in 1870 at 34 years of age testifies to the esteem Clifford enjoyed in the eyes of his contemporaries. His intellectual energy and religious zeal endeared him to those who saw him as defending their cause. This winsomeness and zeal, however, combined with doctrinal romanticism and minimalism to provide the avenue for the encroachment of liberalism into the Baptist Union.

The characteristic showed up early in Clifford’s preaching and constituted his view of qualifications for ministry. In 1873 he wrote six short articles called “Papers on Preaching” for the *General Baptist Magazine*. Does a man have faith? I do not mean, Clifford insists, “has he a bundle of beliefs, all appropriately labelled according to somebody’s theological system and ready to be spread out before an Examining Committee like so many hard geological specimens.” But does he walk by a firm and living trust in the Savior? Does he have a broad sympathetic nature? The man of warmth and sincerity who can “glow into a real ardour of enthusiasm over moral and spiritual ideas and facts” differs entirely from the “cold, narrow, hard spirit, ready to...cherish petty resentments” who becomes a “dissector of creeds, a classifier of the opinions of others, a systematizer of theology.” Such a miscreant will never become a “living, heart-moving, character-elevating preacher.”³⁹ Vital Christian ministry, deep Christian conviction, and

transforming Christian spirituality could easily bypass historic confessional Christianity by Clifford's measurements.

Clifford had little positive to say about confessions and creeds. He looked forward eagerly to the day of creedless religion. In 1909 Clifford saw as a very encouraging sign the call of James Denney for the "abolition of creed subscription as a condition of ministry in the Presbyterian Church." So be it, agrees Clifford. Subscription is "useless, ... unwise, ... [and] harmful." Then, playing the part of historical pundit, Clifford asserts, "Our Baptist fathers have always said so; and it is a proof of the sway of a truer conception, both of the Church and of the ministry, that this principle should receive such acknowledgment."⁴⁰

His New Year's Day sermon for 1920 summoned sympathy for the vision of Mohammedan and Christian standing hand in hand in defiance of the divisive elements of caste, color, and creed. A creed, said the Mohammedan is the "idea that a man must adopt my religious formula or he never by any possibility can enter my heaven." Clifford desired to "open the doors of the Church to men who do not accept the dogmas and beliefs of Western Churches, but are eager to learn for themselves what is the mind of Christ." Clifford believed that churches need to "escape their past," their formalism, their orthodoxy and return to the truth of Jesus who leads each generation willing to hear him from its shriveled theology and barren ethic.⁴¹

In the heat of the Downgrade controversy in 1887, Spurgeon called for a definite declaration of beliefs on the part of the Baptist Union. In Spurgeon's opinion, the fundamental principle of the Union "that every separate church has the liberty to interpret and administer the laws of Christ,

and that the immersion of believers is the only Christian baptism," stood as an open door to error and "involves a strain on the frail fabric which it is ill adapted to bear." He wrote Dr. Culross expressing clearly the danger to which the Baptist Union subjected itself in absence of a creed.

So long as an Association without a creed has no aliens in it, nobody can wish for a creed *formally*, for the spirit is there; but at a time when "strange children" have entered, what is to be done? Whatever may theoretically be in your power, you *practically* have no power whatever. You will go on as you are; and, unless God's grace calls back the wanderers, their numbers will increase, and their courage will cause them to speak out more plainly, to the sorrow of the faithful ones who shielded them in patient hope of better things.⁴²

Clifford answered in the pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Such a declaration might help general knowledge, witness-bearing, and common service, but "Baptists never forget that they are the lineal descendants of the first assertors of the capital and emancipating doctrine of liberty of conscience." Because of this "they fight against creeds ... as weapons of clerical absolutism, tools of theological tyranny, padlocks on the Bible, and foes of Christian brotherhood."⁴³

In spite of such a view, or perhaps because, Clifford worked actively with the Baptist Union Council in addressing the concerns of Charles Spurgeon and his brother James concerning the necessity of the Union's declaring itself on vital doctrinal issues. According to Marchant, "the main body of the theological statement finally proposed to the Assembly in April, 1888, as a statement of its common faith, was really Dr. Clifford's Declaration" that

had been adopted by the Baptist Union Council in February. Spurgeon's opinion that the Council was "too largely committed to a latitudinarian policy beforehand" to be of any substantial help in the confrontation proved true.⁴⁴ The *ad hoc* confession addressed specific issues about which Spurgeon had raised questions, particularly in the *Sword and Trowel*. When the Baptist Union assembled in April of 1888, it adopted this six point confession of Faith by a vote of 2000 to 7.

The vote largely is due to Clifford's expertise in public address. He preached in the morning of the meeting on the subject "The Great Forty Years; or, The Primitive Christian Faith: its Real Substance and Best Defence." He spoke of the Masterhood of Jesus as that one authority which could not be divided. In his inimitable way of weaving together evangelical words and pertinent Scriptures to give an impression of historic evangelicalism as a façade to the substance of modernism, Clifford won the day; enormous applause and an overwhelming vote along with shining reviews followed the performance. According to Marchant, James Spurgeon spoke of the "delight and inspiration with which he had listened in the morning."⁴⁵

The statement, written by Clifford, proposed to the Union by the Council, and adopted in April, 1888, in vocabulary and phrase bears all the marks of the latitudinarianism Spurgeon feared and observed. Its assertions could, and doubtless did, bear two essentially different interpretations. The controversial context of its provenance informs every nuance.

Whilst expressly disavowing and disallowing any powers to control belief, or to restrict enquiry, yet, in view of the uneasiness produced in the churches by recent discussions, and to show our agreement with one

another, and with our fellow-Christians on the great truths of the Gospel, the Council deem it right to say that:

A. Baptized into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost, we have avowed repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—the very elements of a new life; as in the Supper we avow our union with one another, while partaking of the symbol of the body of our Lord, broken for us, and of the blood shed for the remission of sins. The Union, therefore, is an association of Churches and Ministers professing not only to believe the facts and doctrines of the Gospel, but to have undergone the spiritual change expressed or implied in them. This change is the fundamental principle of our church life.

B. The following facts and doctrines are commonly believed by the churches of the Union:

(1), The Divine Inspiration and Authority of the Holy Scripture as the supreme and sufficient rule of our faith and practice; and the right and duty of individual judgment in the interpretation of it.

(2), The fallen and sinful state of man.

(3), The Deity, the incarnation, the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His Sacrificial and Mediatorial work.

(4), Justification by faith—a faith that works by love and produces holiness.

(5), The work of the Holy Spirit in the conversion of sinners and in the sanctification of all who believe.

(6), The Resurrection; the Judgment at the last day, according to the words of our Lord in Matt. 25.46.⁴⁶

Spurgeon, well aware of the slipperiness of unexplained assertions in a latitudinarian atmosphere, found no consolation but much distress in the confession and particularly the enthusiasm with which it was adopted. Clifford had demonstrated his mastery of a crowd; his success demonstrated also that piety, fervor, and courage were valued with equal, if not greater,

affection than soundness and clarity of doctrine.

Charles Bateman's biography of Clifford contains Bateman's personal testimony that Spurgeon did not "rank Dr. Clifford among the heretics."⁴⁷ Spurgeon, according to Bateman, believed Dr. Clifford was misunderstood. Exactly what confidence such an anecdote deserves might remain a mystery, for one cannot rank Spurgeon among the theological dimwits nor conclude that Spurgeon was ignorant of Clifford's flair for embracing the new and enfolding modernism into his Arminian pietism. Spurgeon's reticence to name Clifford, or indeed any one, among the suspected can only come from what Bateman called Spurgeon's "warm admiration of Dr. Clifford's fine character."

It is just as clear, however, that Spurgeon did not include Clifford among those with whom he had "no sort of disagreement." In November of 1887 he wrote Dr. Culross, then President of the Baptist Union, of his essential spiritual union with MacLaren, Aldis, and Angus. Because they were "all Christians and Baptists" they would find "many ways of co-operation" though they stayed "in the Union" while he was "out of it."⁴⁸ Spurgeon's misgivings and substantial fears concerning the doctrinal stability of the Union soon proved to be concrete and belied the popular notion that they simply constituted the wild imaginings of a sick, tired, overworked, doctrinally-fastidious preacher/war-horse. Robert Hall, should he return, would stand with mouth agape as he stared into the pitiful little core of beliefs far more diminutive than he ever anticipated they should be. The Baptist Union constituency would look cold in the face of an aggressive and destructive liberalism in the wiry and energetic body of its much-beloved pietist

of the New Connection, John Clifford.

Gwilym O. Griffith in reviewing Marchant's book, *Dr. John Clifford*, inserted his personal judgment on the "Downgrade." He agreed with the Council's view that since Spurgeon made public accusations, he should have provided names. Just as clearly he saw no way the controversy could have been avoided. Slick diplomacy might have pushed the problem underground but would have spread an infection of mistrust and rancor through the whole body. Spurgeon, he believes did the only thing consistent with his views in leaving the Union. Though it cost him the fellowship of brethren he loved dearly, the Union could never have acquiesced to "Mr. Spurgeon's authoritarian and doctrinal position." Neither Clifford nor the Union was prepared for such restrictions. With admirable candor Griffith also recognizes that Spurgeon was not at fault "on the main issue . . . as the history of the last thirty years has clearly shown."

The movement away from the old standards of thought and faith had already set in, and it was not simply that here and there a dogma was being recast; the entire authoritarian basis of belief, the very foundation of orthodox standards, were being undermined. The tell-tale yawning cracks and fissures in the flooring of orthodoxy might for a time be smeared over with irenic formulations of "things most surely believed," but to patch the cracks was not to save the foundations. To change the figure, the ship was casting off from the old moorings, and it was small comfort to Mr. Spurgeon to be assured that the drift was hardly perceptible and that the most seaward-looking among the crew were nearer the shore than he thought.⁴⁹

The controversy engaged the convictions of one who desired the tried and true

stability of *terra firma* and one who was for launching out into unknown and often uncharted waters. "It was in the ordering of Providence," a merciful Providence in Griffith's opinion, "that the year which saw the outbreak of the dispute was the year of Clifford's presidency of the Baptist Union." "Two nobler spirits never opposed each other," he continued; "Spurgeon was for *terra firma*, Clifford for the open sea."

Biblical Inspiration

Clifford, president of the Baptist Union in 1888, published a book after Spurgeon's death entitled *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*. In commenting on the usefulness of this book, G. W. Byrt says that Clifford "frankly faced the many serious questions which the new ways of thinking and recent scientific discoveries had raised concerning Scripture." Byrt believed that the book proved to be "effective help" to "thoughtful people" who needed "guidance towards an intellectually secure reason for the faith that was within them."⁵⁰

Clifford's forthrightness certainly vindicated Spurgeon, for Clifford affirmed in unambiguous terms that he definitely rejected the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. In fact, Clifford believed that "we seriously imperil the authority and limit the service of Scripture every time we advocate its absolute inerrancy."⁵¹ In a chapter entitled "Three Defences of an Inerrant Bible," Clifford makes a determined effort to dismantle some of the major arguments for inerrancy. First, the autograph theory is indefensible since it can be neither proved nor disproved in the absence of the autographs and assumes God was careless in not preserving them. It is "as unwarranted as it is useless, and as mischievous as it is unwarranted." Second, Clifford denies that the Bible claims

infallibility for itself. Neither Jesus nor the Apostles should be quoted in favor of inerrancy; in fact, it is more consistent with all we know to believe that men moved by the Holy Ghost should not be error-free. Third, to use inerrancy as a doctrinal safeguard was useless and unnecessary according to Clifford. Most people are saved simply upon hearing a simple testimony from a preacher of the cross and have no concept of inerrancy one way or the other. Furthermore, the dogmatism demanded by the inerrancy doctrine is out of harmony with the actual facts of Scripture. True doctrine can only be harmed by such close identification with this untimely doctrine. Given the spirit of the modern world, the teaching of inerrancy is one of the surest ways of frustrating the redeeming purpose for which the Revelation of the Christ is given.⁵²

Preaching at Westbourne Chapel on Sunday evening, September 15, Clifford presented a defense of the credibility of Christianity entitled "The Supreme Test of Every Religion." He argued that "ground of our appeal . . . rests upon experience, but not upon the experience of an individual." Nor does the appeal rest on a church, or a group of churches or a supposed infallible head of a group of churches. In addition, it is "not on a book, though that book be the Bible, but on the accumulated experiences of Christian men throughout nineteen centuries. . . . We do not say with our fathers of fifty years ago, 'Here is the Bible; you must accept it, must believe it word for word.'" Through much critical reflection on the New Testament modern Christians could have a substantial body of facts favorable to Christianity. That helps some but does not carry us all the way, for "the appeal is really to the massed experience of Christian men

throughout the centuries.”⁵³

Christology and Scripture

Even this “massed experience,” however, could be somewhat misleading, particularly if the believer pays more attention to the words about Christ than to the inspiration received from or the feeling about Christ. The authority of Scripture for Clifford lay in the believer’s encounter with the living Christ. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who will guide us into all truth, the simple Christian can discern the true Christ from the false or embellished Christ in Scripture. One can discern the Christ of faith from the Christ of history simply by reading the text and bearing in mind the tendencies of admirers to exaggerate and embellish by manufacturing deeds and words Jesus never did or said. Given such a principle of interpretation, one could only conclude that the most exalted and extreme claims of Jesus were those produced by the community. “The disciple . . . surrounds his master with a spectacular magnificence of external and meretricious glory, a flimsy and gaudy covering that the original would despise.”⁵⁴ Therefore, those elements of his life that appeared to be supernatural and the radical claims he made to deity must certainly be the work of the community. Clifford was confident, moreover, that the pious will have no trouble discerning where he hears the true Christ and where he hears the echo of the community.⁵⁵

Clifford’s criticisms and reconstructions, however, are both inadequate and pointless. His rejection of the autograph theory because it is hypothetical shows that he never grasped the principle that a stream is never purer than its source and at all points where it remains uncorrupted it is just as pure as its source. Also, his arguing

against the autograph theory was irrelevant since Clifford rejected the authority of many passages whose text is undisputed. Parts of the Old Testament teach a mechanical deism, a low morality is justified by attributing actions to God’s command, and the imprecatory psalms advocate unrestrained hate towards one’s enemies, according to Clifford. The finding of the autographs would neither change those passages nor Clifford’s rejection of them. Clifford well recognized that fact.

His treatment of Christ’s view of Scripture is shallow and reveals his epistemological inconsistency and subjectivity. He claims that Jesus “distinctly and with repeated emphasis, sets his authority against, and over, that of the legislative records of the Old Testament.”⁵⁶ He also denies that Jesus ever had any intention of defending the verbal truth of Scripture, but was here in person to “bring the Divine ideal into the actual experiences of the hour of men.”⁵⁷

His exegesis of the Scriptures with which he dealt is faulty, and reflects prior adherence to the results of the burgeoning historical-critical method. He also omitted the preponderance of Scriptures relevant to that subject and dismissed the Apostolic witness to the inspiration of Scripture with incredibly insufficient investigation. His mishandling of 2 Timothy 3:16 reveals the impressionistic and non-contextual way in which Clifford uses biblical language:

Is there no “breath of God” in Ecclesiasticus? Are not the books of the Maccabees profitable for instructions in righteousness? . . . Was the New Testament in existence as a whole before the middle of the Second Century? Surely these and similar considerations ought to make us pause before we take the sayings of Paul about his own Inspiration, and

of Peter about the Inspiration of the Prophets and use them as if they had in their minds at the time every chapter and verse of either the Protestant or the Roman Catholic Bible.⁵⁸

Paul, as indicated above, was not the only apostle to suffer at the hands of Clifford. Peter's statement in 2 Peter 3:16 concerning Paul's writing is not mentioned and his affirmation concerning the Spirit's activity in inspiration is managed in an equally irresponsible manner.

Inspiration is not always Revelation. It is a movement of God within the soul. It is essentially subjective; it is human and it is perfectly consistent with all we know of God's action . . . that men moved by the Holy Ghost . . . should not be error-proof. The Bible . . . is a collection of fragments, of quotations, of comments upon quotations, . . . of genealogies and laws, written by men, and in parts edited and re-edited by men, and it is not fair to contend that Peter's statement includes every line within the Testaments, and is applicable to each part in the same sense.⁵⁹

Clifford's method of interpretation leaves many questions unanswered and provides no criteria by which to judge the claim to credibility of any doctrine. Disagreement over which words and actions are really those of Jesus can be resolved by no court of appeals, outside of the "spirit-led consciousness" of a third party. Clifford was quite confident that Jesus' promise of the Spirit to "guide you into all truth" was given to all the generations of Christians as well as the Apostles. Through much painstaking, proper application of reason, and scientific interpretation of Scripture, the Spirit guides us into the truth. "It is not that truth itself is given us, as you may give a book to a reader, . . . but we ourselves are taken where the truth is." In the final analy-

sis, one can only be sure of the voice of God, when his consciousness assures him that he has properly read the universal Christian consciousness and he speaks the mind of the Spirit.

Clifford breathed such fire in asserting the direct authority of the Spirit or of Christ in the human conscience that even a conservative inerrantist like A. T. Robertson could be taken away in admiration. In *Modern Baptist Heroes and Martyrs* published after the 1911 meeting of the Baptist World Alliance (at which Clifford preached), Robertson included a chapter on the still living and energetic Clifford, a man "born of the stuff of which martyrs are made." Robertson recalled Clifford's presence at the 1905 formation of the Baptist World Alliance and Clifford's election as its first president. Robertson said that "it was the delight of that great body to elect Dr. Clifford;" he recalled also that "his every appearance was the signal for unbounded enthusiasm." He also mentioned that it was "one of the proudest occasions" of his life to stand on the platform of Westbourne Park Chapel from which Clifford has sent forth "his clarion calls to battle." Clifford "has caught with all his might the Baptist message and he sounds it out before all the world." Robertson lauded Clifford as one whose "spirit is unconquerable" and whose "optimism is grounded in God."⁶⁰

To Robertson the sermon was a "wonderful apologetic." The three paragraphs he quotes concern the pre-eminent authority of Christ. "The deepest impulse of Baptist life," according to Clifford, "has been the upholding of the sole and exclusive authority of Christ Jesus against all possible encroachment." Encroachment on Christ's authority could come even from Scripture according to the sermon. His words are

characteristic of the attractive packaging of a siren's call to destruction.

He is Lord of All, and He only is Lord of all. Our conception of Christ's authority is exclusive. We refuse to everybody and everything the slightest share in it. It is absolute, unlimited, indefeasible, admits of no question, and allows no rival. The right to rule in the religious life is in Him and in no other, be he as saintly as St. Francis, as devout as St. Bernard, as loving as John, or as practical as Paul; not in any offices, papal, episcopal or ministerial, not in tradition, though it may interpret the goings of the Spirit of God and illustrate the effects of obedience and disobedience; not in the Old Testament not [nor?] yet in the New, though their working values are great, since they enable us to know His mind, understand His laws of conduct and partake more freely of His Spirit; . . . Jesus Christ holds with us the first place and the last. His word is final. His rule is supreme.⁶¹

Neither Paul nor John, the Old Testament nor the New may usurp the place of Christ, according to the impassioned rhetoric of John Clifford. Ontologically, no Christian will disagree. Jesus alone is Lord; He has no equal for He is God the Son in the flesh of our human nature. One of the ironies of this point is that Clifford did not have a view of the Lordship of Christ that would make it right for a mortal to follow him with such ardor. Clifford would seek to convince us all to be idolators. But he is not really speaking in the realm of ontology when he begins to set the authority of Jesus in comparison to the authority of John, Paul, and the Bible. He is dealing with an issue of epistemology as it relates to authority, not ontology as it relates to authority. While an infinite ontological superiority defies contradiction, even the contradiction of Clifford, epistemologically the distinction between Jesus and His

apostles is impossible to maintain. Following Jesus endears the authority of the Bible to a person and establishes its revelatory capacity and authority for all thought and action. Such misleading rhetoric, and Clifford was a master of it, frequently flows from his pen, as it must have from his mouth and enmeshed his hearers in a net of confusion from which they rarely could escape. If James Spurgeon and A. T. Robertson found Clifford's passionate presentation irresistible, though given in defense of a liberal theology destructive of true Christianity, some of the astonishment, even mystery, as to how he carried the crowd on that poignant day in the Baptist Union in 1888 is explained.

In rejecting the necessity of inerrancy as a doctrinal safeguard, Clifford severely begs the question. He begins by assuming that any doctrine affected by his "experiential" method of interpretation is certainly not essential to the Christian faith. If a doctrine falls it is not essential, *ergo*, the loss of inerrancy affects no essential doctrine. A thorough reading of Clifford's works, however, shows that he had in fact compromised some basic evangelical truths that Spurgeon considered essentially and broadly Christian.

Universalism

For example, Clifford's highly rhetorical messages on evangelism fail to escape an implicit if not an explicit universalism. In 1920, Clifford delivered the first series of "The John Clifford Lectureship" established by the National Council of British Brotherhood. The lectures were published as a book under the title *The Gospel of World Brotherhood According to Jesus*. Chapter 3, "Is man as man a son of God?," reveals these tendencies quite clearly:

Jesus never treats the fact of sin as breaking off or hiding the filial relation of the offender to God . . . As sin does not destroy God's relation to us as Father, so it cannot prevent or end our relation to Him as sons . . . As the holiness of the new redeemed and regenerated soul does not create the relation, so sin does not extinguish it. It is eternal. It is fundamental. The prodigal son is still a son, and it is not likely the fatherly heart will forget him, or that he will find rest till he sees him seated at the family table . . . According to Jesus, then, man's sonship to God is an indefeasible fact, a glorious gospel, Sin does not destroy it, . . . Thus the truth that we are the children of God, and that he is our Father, embraces, completes and harmonizes all other truths we possess regarding Him, ourselves and our world.⁶²

Consistent with his universalism, Clifford rejected eternal punishment and interpreted those biblical passages that seem to indicate such as judgments upon world civilizations. Empires that failed in incorporating adequately the concept of the brotherhood of man into their culture would perish never to rise again. However, these judgments, according to Clifford, were not brought against individual people. As reported in the *Christian World Pulpit*, when he preached his presidential address at the International Brotherhood Congress, Clifford warned, "It is demonstrated once more that the moral order of the world is fixed and determined for the punishment, yea, the eternal punishment, of arrogant, self-seeking, hard-hearted, and grasping nations."⁶³

Clifford's universalism rescued him from the dilemma proposed by the possibility that one's reason might fail to assure him of truth. Even in those cases where the searcher is beset by confusion, Clifford assures him that since he is God's workmanship, God can never leave him or

forsake him. "He will not leave man to perish."⁶⁴ If he could see Emerson as a Christian, and could represent the Moham-medan as a man of true faith, we are not surprised when we find Clifford throughout his public ministry rejoicing in those "saints of social reform outside the Churches, full of faith and of venture and strong in the conviction of the final triumph of righteousness."⁶⁵ This final triumph of righteousness would be greatly aided by the League of Nations. If given the opportunity and resources it deserves, the League will point to paths "we have to take if we are to reach the condition where men may realize that they are brothers predestined to live together as sons of God."⁶⁶ Furthermore, if the community in writing the gospels tended to embellish or exaggerate on Christ's person, as Clifford was quite willing to admit, they certainly could fall prey to exaggerated and "gaudy" views of punishment.

Atonement and Imputation

Clifford denied a penal substitutionary view of the atonement. He sought to maintain the word "vicarious" but so interpreted it as to render it senseless as far as any historic understanding of the word is concerned. Clifford has no patience with "the 'appeasing' content of the symbol of propitiation" and claims that the "paying a debt" metaphor is "so seriously charged with error as to make it more mischievous than useful." He reduces the rich storehouse of New Testament allusions to sacrifice and death to an ambiguous affirmation that these simply refer to, in the words of Livingstone, "the inherent and everlasting mercy of God made apparent to human eyes and ears. . . . It [the death of Christ] showed that God forgives because he loves to forgive." He rejects the ransom

and satisfaction theories and denominates the theories of imputation connected with the traditional doctrines of substitutionary atonement and justification by faith as unethical. His caricature, common to the liberalism of his day, objectifies one point of Spurgeon's Downgrade summary: The atonement is scouted.

Add to this the non-ethical doctrine of the external transfer of guilt, and merit; the acceptance of the processes of courts of law with all their glaring faults and inevitable imperfections as adequate representations of God, though always obscuring and often omitting the very heart of God; and it becomes clear that the whole forensic theory bases the redemption of man not on the fact of the Divine Fatherhood revealed in it, but on the arbitrary and cruel despotisms of the Imperial Court of Rome.⁶⁷

The rejection of imputation in atonement immediately poses the problem of the orthodox doctrine of original sin. As a General Baptist, Clifford already had a predisposition toward minimizing the effects of original sin. His temperament, education, and chosen sources of intellectual growth and development fed his doctrinal bias. As early as 1867, Clifford wrote as if spirituality and godliness rested in embryonic form in the child alongside latent lusts and selfishness. Proper training would cause the one to grow and diminish the impact of the other. In *Christian Nurture* Clifford compares a child to a seed awaiting the proper conditions for growth and to a musical instrument awaiting the hand of a master musician. Every child has "certain powers which must be distinctly recognized." These powers include godward compulsions as well as "warfare with lusts." The whole nature "waits in responsive attitude the touch of the parent's hand." "The fact of sinful bias," Clifford writes is "never to

be blinked, as it is not to be exaggerated."⁶⁸

The child considered as a musical instrument will respond accordingly so that if one touches the "keys of faith, affection, conscience, . . . out come melodious songs for God and man."⁶⁹ If we appreciate "to the fullest extent the divine dignity of the child that is in our trust" and put into play the nurturing principles most adapted to foster the positive application of intrinsic powers, right religion results. "Religion is the growth of the whole man in allegiance to God," so we are to believe, "and in the service of his fellow by a wise forthputting of faith and conscience, love and hope, humbleness and obedience." In pursuit of the thesis that "God's chief work, so far as we know it, is the education of men," Clifford sets forth his ideal of the forming of Christ in the heart.

We have to nurture children for God that have much that is relatively good in them, with also much that is decidedly evilward, and we must adjust our training accordingly, not leaving them to sin in hope that they may one day experience a conversion, but striving with all our might to educate them so that if possible they may grow up in the love of Christ, and likeness to Christ, and never be called to know a sudden, dateable, and describable transformation.⁷⁰

In the middle of much that is commendable and wise, scriptural and heavenly, Clifford poises his tentative doctrine of sin. He wants to develop youths with "strong, stable, and healthy affinities for goodness, who love it with all their hearts." He wants to see Josephs and Daniels in whom "the leaven of frivolity will not give decay to their solid thoughtfulness, nor corrupt their manful piety." He envisions a Christian nurture that promotes a "full and determined hate of all evil, a pure and quick eye

for the lurking places and subterfuges of sin, and an absorbing affection for the person of Christ."⁷¹ He encourages the development of these through a love that wins over the "rebellious and headstrong nature" and is unafraid to strike itself by disciplining another. The eye of disciplining love fixates on the production of a "godly, strong, and holy man."⁷² But he wants it grown from the intrinsic energy of goodness, faith, and love that proper care will develop; he wants it without a felt conversion, and he wants a righteousness that springs from within, born of their principled realization of the "fatherly relation of God to them as revealed in Jesus Christ."⁷³

Evil is present, yes, and powerful, and finds occasion in each person for its distorting and destructive manifestation. But an original sin that both condemns and corrupts so thoroughly that mankind without exception is its slave Clifford found no space for in his theology. Spurgeon claimed the doctrine as a non-negotiable. Clifford rejected it by minimizing the importance of the historic space-time fall of man. The microcosmic impact of Christian nurture in the individual replicated the macrocosmic amelioration of the entire race through the developmental powers of spiritual evolution. Clifford accepted the judgment of biological evolution concerning the ascent of man and transferred that into the spiritual sphere. Just as evolution experienced many deviations and degradations along the way, so has man's spiritual progress seen intermittent periods of decline, though, in both cases the predominant trend is upwards. "In short, not one 'fall of man,' but a succession of falls."⁷⁴

Baptist Identity

In view of these positions assumed by

Clifford, vice-president and president of the Baptist Union in the initial years of the Downgrade, it is no wonder that Spurgeon considered the case hopeless and proved hesitant to reveal the names of those he opposed. Several observations close this brief profile of John Clifford.

Clifford's ministry spanned the years in which a disturbing shift occurred. Building on the influence of Robert Hall, Jr., Baptists of the Baptist Union showed strong resistance to singular attempts to set forth precise doctrinal definition. They were satisfied to envision Christianity as an amorphous evangelical "experience" or "spirit" rather than evangelical doctrine. Sir James Marchant in speaking of Clifford's strategic address before the spring assembly of 1888 said, "It reminded the Assembly of those primitive days when the one Authority that all could accept was not yet divided, exploited, or timeworn." "The Masterhood of Jesus Christ," that is, the powerful impression of his person in the minds and hearts of his original followers before they began to write their impressions in the words of a book, was "all in all." The address "gave the central position to the cross—and that is the gist of 'evangelicalism.' It drew the saving inferences for society, for progress, for men in all their groupings and for mankind in all its totality, for which the evangelical faith would be the best basis and guarantee—if it would only unfold its own implications."⁷⁵ However, merely a central position to the cross does not mean that one has a historically evangelical interpretation of the cross. Clifford obviously did not. The word evangelical became so debased that A. C. Underwood could apply it to T. R. Glover (as well as call Glover "Christocentric"), who expended great amounts of intellectual energy seeking to

undercut the supports of historic Christianity. Underwood also calls Clifford “an ardent evangelical” and betrays the present stance of the Baptist Union by commending Clifford for not confusing “the permanent element in Christianity with its theological expression”⁷⁶

The alarm created in 1971 by Michael Taylor, principal of Northern Baptist College, when he denied the deity of Christ in an address at the Baptist Union Assembly, made conservatives in the Baptist Union push for a stronger statement of doctrine. Any reprimand of Taylor, however, failed to materialize as the Council thwarted those attempts. Spurgeon-like many churches withdrew over this theological failure in the Union.

But Taylor was not through. He published in 1977 *A Plain Man's Guide to the Incarnation* explaining how the doctrine of the incarnation has taken its place among other items of non-sensical rubbish such as a literal creation of heaven and earth as described in Genesis 1 and 2 and the theory of a verbally-inspired Bible. Now, however, “we don't believe in miracles and we don't believe in the intervention to crown all interventions, namely the Incarnation.” This frees us also from the “rather rude and very unfair” implication of exclusivity in Christianity and makes it inconceivable “that the God who acted in Jesus has failed to act in other equally important ways for the good of mankind.” We may now be free to say quite frankly that “the Godlike quality about Jesus did not arise from the fact (sorry) that he was God anymore than we are God.” Now we can quit “toeing the line over the incarnation.”⁷⁷ Clifford had beat Taylor to the punch a century earlier. He was simply more refined, earnest, and pious than Taylor.

Clifford's tenure among English Baptists

revealed not only a decline of confessional identity, but a reinterpretation of some peculiarly baptistic ideas. For a denominations whose view of the ordinances so precisely depended on the regulative principle of biblical authority, the surrender of any recognizable view of Scripture as the infallible rule of faith and practice posed a major problem. In addition, the defining ordinance of believers' baptism by immersion, at one time the sole doctrinal affirmation of the Baptist Union, fell into the category of personal conscience rather than church requirement. Clifford's church left the whole question of baptism to the individual conscience. The church's Constitution, composed by Clifford, stated, “Every applicant for membership is urged to consider the Lord's will on this subject, but the rule followed is ‘Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind,’ and act according to his judgment of the Master's teaching. The whole question is left to the individual conscience.”⁷⁸

The matter of conscience itself underwent alteration as many interpreted the Baptist principle in terms of a humanistic view of liberty of conscience rather than a view centered on Scripture and the nature of the Gospel. Cornelius Woelfkin witnesses to Clifford's impact in this area in a letter to Sir James Marchant. Woelfkin, an American Baptist liberal who forestalled the Northern Baptist Convention's attempt to adopt a confession of faith in 1922, wrote, “We regard him not only as the outstanding champion of Baptist principles in the English-speaking world, but as a gift to all the Churches in his great advocacy of the freedom of the spirit in things pertaining to God and religious duty.”⁷⁹

Clifford's management of The Downgrade Controversy showed that many ministers were either unwilling to come to

a full understanding of issues at stake or were willing to compromise truth for the sake of unity. Even the six-point statement of 1888 was worded in such a way that men of opposite opinions could agree with it. The Union had been formed for the practical benefits a closer association of individual churches would give, and few safeguards were taken to protect their doctrinal integrity. Probably they never fathomed that such safeguard would be needed. When trouble came, the vast majority preferred unity at any cost rather than obedience to Scripture.

Conclusion

The mid-nineteenth century brought a noticeable shift in the thinking of many Baptists. Clifford's success and popularity, whether a cause or simply an indicator, marked a revolutionary shift in the Baptist self-concept. The Baptist Union opted rather for ill-defined doctrine so that external unity might be maintained and chose the path of Clifford rather than that of Spurgeon. Whereas, biblical infallibility was the mainspring of authority and specific doctrinal content mattered in the B. C. (Before Clifford) period, now human consciousness and freedom became the mainspring of authority. Specific doctrine fell into disfavor as cold, calcified, and a tyranny to human liberty. Baptists began to work within a Cartesian rather than a Pauline framework. No matter that Spurgeon couldn't bring himself to name the offenders. It probably would have made little difference.

ENDNOTES

¹Robert Hall, *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.* 2 vols. (New York: G. & C. & H Carvill, 1830) 2:211.

²Hall, "Essay on Antinomianism," *Works*,

2:325

³Hall, *Works*, 1:94.

⁴Hall, "Reply to Kinghorn on Terms of Communion," *Works*, 1:271

⁵Hall, "On Terms of Communion," *Works*, 1:99.

⁶Hall, "Introductory Preface to 'Help to Zion's Travellers'," in *Works*, 2:333.

⁷Hall, *Works*, 2:145.

⁸Graham Hughes, *Robert Hall* (London: The Carey Press, 1943) 144-145.

⁹Hall, *Works*, 1:21.

¹⁰Hall, *Works*, 1:105.

¹¹This paraphrased description of the times was taken from John Clifford. "The International Mind in 1919" in the *Christian World Pulpit*, vol. 97 (January 7, 1920) 1.

¹²G. W. Byrt. *John Clifford: A Fighting Free Churchman* (London: The Kingsgate Press, 1947) 18

¹³*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴Sir James Marchant. *Dr. John Clifford, C. H. Life Letters and Reminiscences* (London: Cassell and Company, 1924) 13-14.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁶This discussion of Clifford's view of Emerson is based on his sermon "Emerson: His Ideas and Influence" in *The Christian World Pulpit*, vol. 63 (June 17, 1903) 380-382.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 382.

¹⁸Marchant, 24. Marchant's account of Clifford's college days (of which he says, "Few records remain") relies on reminiscences by Clifford in his last days. Bateman records the college experience in the same pattern with Marchant but, as Bateman wrote about twenty years earlier some of his statements are of the "he told the writer" variety. (Charles T. Bateman, *John Clifford: Free Church Leader and Preacher* [London: National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches, 1904]

- 30). Byrt relies heavily on Bateman and Marchant, many times paraphrasing the lengthy primary quotes found in Marchant.
- ¹⁹Marchant, 44. Bates College, organized in 1863, was a Free Will Baptist College located in Maine.
- ²⁰John Clifford, "Saving the Soul of the World in 1917," in *The Christian World Pulpit*, vol. 93 (January 2, 1918) 2.
- ²¹John Clifford, "The Growth of Man in 1910," in *The Christian World Pulpit*, vol. 79 (January 4, 1911) 5.
- ²²Clifford, "Saving the Soul of the World," 3.
- ²³John Clifford, "International Brotherhood," in *The Christian World Pulpit*, vol. 96 (September 24, 1919) 150. The next year in the same periodical in an article entitled "The International Mind," Clifford continued his attack on the liquor trade and liquor consumption. In America people know that "alcohol drinking is a national evil, is bad business, and leads to bad morals," Britishers must see that the "drinking habit is a fatal handicap to national efficiency and industrial progress, ...and unfits the nation for the fiercest commercial competition the world has ever seen." "If we want increased output we must get rid of the thoughtless, senseless, wasteful, undisciplined drinking habit which makes bad work and bad time."
- ²⁴John Clifford, "The Revolution of 1902," in *The Christian World Pulpit*, vol. 63 (January 7, 1903) 13.
- ²⁵Cited by Gwilym O. Griffith in "Dr. Clifford" in *Watchman Examiner*, 7 August 1924, 1020.
- ²⁶A.T. Robertson, "John Clifford: Hero of Religious Liberty," in *Modern Baptist Heroes and Martyrs*, ed. J. N. Prestridge (Louisville, KY: The World Press, 1911) 262.
- ²⁷Quoted in Byrt, 141.
- ²⁸Clifford, "Saving the Soul of the World in 1917," 5.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, 1.
- ³⁰John Clifford, "The International Mind in 1919," in *The Christian World Pulpit*, vol. 97 (January 7, 1920) 2.
- ³¹John Clifford, "The Surprises of 1908," in *The Christian World Pulpit*, vol. 75 (January 6, 1909) 13.
- ³²Clifford, "The International Mind in 1919," 5.
- ³³Clifford, "The Surprises of 1908," 13, 14.
- ³⁴*Ibid.*, 10.
- ³⁵John Clifford, "The Growth of Man in 1910," in *The Christian World Pulpit*, vol. 79 (January 4, 1911) 2-3.
- ³⁶Clifford, "Saving the Soul of the World in 1917," 6.
- ³⁷Clifford, "The Revolution of 1902," 12.
- ³⁸Clifford, "Saving the Soul of the World in 1917," 5.
- ³⁹John Clifford, "Will He Make a Preacher?" in *The General Baptist Magazine*, vol. 75 (January 1873) 27. In the second article Clifford itemizes important aspects of a preacher's equipment. First is his piety. Next, "stands the truth, the word of God, the means by which the hearts of men are to be reached, and swayed." The last four articles all dealt with issues of health of the body and care for the voice. Much good advice cleverly and forcefully crafted is in the articles, but doctrine scarcely appears, and then largely in negative overtones.
- ⁴⁰Clifford, "The Surprises of 1908," 15.
- ⁴¹Clifford, "The International Mind in 1919," 5-6.
- ⁴²C. H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography*, 2 vols originally published as four (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976) 2:478-479. For the Baptist Union statement quoted as a response by John Aldis, Joseph Angus, and Alexander Maclaren to Mr. Spurgeon's withdrawal, see G. Holden Pike, *The Life and Work of Charles Haddon Spurgeon*, 6 vols. (London, Paris & Melbourne: Cassell and Company Limited, n.d.) 289. In these six volumes, distributed by subscription only, the pagination is consecutive for volumes 1 and 2. It begins again in volume 3 and continues through volume 4. The same pattern is repeated in volumes 5 and 6.
- ⁴³Clifford as cited in Byrt, 106-107.
- ⁴⁴Spurgeon, 2:479.
- ⁴⁵Marchant, 165.
- ⁴⁶William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969) 345-346.
- ⁴⁷Bateman, xv.
- ⁴⁸Spurgeon, 2:478-479.
- ⁴⁹Griffith, 1919.
- ⁵⁰Byrt, 102.
- ⁵¹John Clifford, *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 3d ed. (London: James Clark, 1899) 63.
- ⁵²*Ibid.*, 78.
- ⁵³John Clifford, "The Supreme Test of Every Religion," in *The Christian World Pulpit*, vol. 72 (October 2, 1907) 211-212.
- ⁵⁴John Clifford, *Ultimate Problems of Christianity* (London: The Kingsgate Press and James Clark, 1906) 58.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., 65.

⁵⁷Ibid., 67.

⁵⁸Ibid., 73-74.

⁵⁹Ibid., 72-73.

⁶⁰Robertson, 261, 263, 265.

⁶¹John Clifford, as cited in *ibid.*, 264-265.

⁶²John Clifford, *The Gospel of World Brotherhood According to Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1920) 28, 29, 46.

⁶³Clifford, "International Brotherhood," 151.

⁶⁴John Clifford, *The Christian Certainties* (London: Ibister, 1894) 80-85.

⁶⁵Clifford, "International Brotherhood," 153.

⁶⁶Ibid., 151.

⁶⁷John Clifford, *The Secret of Jesus* (Manchester: James Robinson, 1908) 105.

⁶⁸John Clifford, "Christian Nurture" in *the General Baptist Magazine* (October 1867) 290, 291, 293.

⁶⁹Ibid., 291.

⁷⁰Ibid., 293.

⁷¹Ibid., 294.

⁷²Ibid., 295.

⁷³Ibid., 294.

⁷⁴Clifford, *Ultimate Problems of Christianity*, 269.

⁷⁵Marchant, 164-165.

⁷⁶A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1947) 232.

⁷⁷Citations are taken from Michael Taylor, *A Plain Man's Guide to the Incarnation* (Loughborough, Leisc.: ONE Publications, 1977), 1-10 in Leon McBeth, Ed. *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990) 386-389.

⁷⁸Marchant, 45.

⁷⁹Ibid., 46.