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## Introduction

The figures associated with the ministry of Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92) are staggering. He preached his first sermon at the age of sixteen, not long after his conversion. At seventeen, he was called to be the pastor of Waterbeach Chapel, and in two years the congregation grew from forty to several hundred.<sup>1</sup> In about three years, he had preached nearly 700 times to his congregation and in the surrounding villages.<sup>2</sup> By the time of his departure, the entire village of Waterbeach had been transformed, by his own account.<sup>3</sup> At nineteen, he was called to pastor the historic New Park Street Chapel in London, formerly pastored by leading figures of the Particular Baptists such as Benjamin Keach, John Gill, and John Rippon. Over the course of thirty-eight years, Spurgeon preached on average three times per week,<sup>4</sup> and in some weeks, he preached as many as thirteen

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1. Wayland notes that the congregation grew from forty to one hundred in the first year. H. L. Wayland, *Charles H. Spurgeon: His Faith and Works* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1892), 26.

2. The earliest notebooks of Spurgeon's sermons contain over 300 sermon outlines, written and preached during these early years of his ministry. However, their numbering system reveals that he often preached sermons multiple times as he traveled throughout the Cambridgeshire countryside. The final count of his preaching from these notebooks numbers well over 700.

3. *Autobiography* 1:227.

4. Craig Skinner, *Spurgeon & Son: The Forgotten Story of Thomas Spurgeon and His Famous Father, Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999), 224. There were four corporate gatherings per week at the Metropolitan Tabernacle – Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Monday evening, and Thursday evening – which meant that he preached at least four times a week when healthy, not to mention outside preaching occasions. Skinner's estimate possibly takes into account Spurgeon's seasons of illness.

times.<sup>5</sup> His sermons were sold as weekly pamphlets called the *Penny Pulpit*, with an average circulation of 25,000, but in one case selling as many as 350,000 copies.<sup>6</sup> Each year, his sermons would be collected and published in the *New Park Street Pulpit* and *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* series, beginning in 1855, through his death in 1892, and only ending in 1917 because of a paper shortage due to the First World War.<sup>7</sup> They would comprise a total of 3,563 sermons in sixty-three volumes.<sup>8</sup> These sermons were sold not only in the British Isles and other English-speaking countries, but also in many other countries around the world, being translated into nearly forty languages, including French, German, Dutch, Swedish, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Urdu, Spanish, and many others.<sup>9</sup> Spurgeon's publishers estimated over 100 million sermons sold in all.<sup>10</sup>

Spurgeon's ministry was not limited to his own preaching. Beginning with one student in 1855, Spurgeon would go on to found the Pastors' College and train almost 900 preachers, with most of them going on to serve in local churches and as missionaries.<sup>11</sup> According to Michael Nicholls, in the second half of the nineteenth century, "the number of Baptist churches in London doubled and nearly all these were founded under Spurgeonian influence of one kind or another."<sup>12</sup> Spurgeon would also begin the Colportage Association, employing evangelists to go throughout the country selling Christian books and distributing

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5. *Autobiography* 2:81.

6. Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1992), 324. The sermon that sold 350,000 copies was "Baptismal Regeneration," *MTP* 10:313.

7. C. H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon's Sermons Beyond Volume 63*, ed. Terence Crosby (Leominster, UK: Day One Publications, 2009), 11; Skinner, *Spurgeon & Son*, 224.

8. If not for the war shortage, Skinner believes that the total number of sermons published would have approached 10,000. Skinner, *Spurgeon & Son*, 224.

9. *Autobiography* 4:291.

10. Ernest W. Bacon, *Spurgeon: Heir of the Puritans* (Arlington Heights, IL: Christian Liberty Press, 2001), 73.

11. *Autobiography* 4:330.

12. Michael Nicholls, "Mission Yesterday and Today: Charles Haddon Spurgeon 1834-1892," *Baptist Review of Theology* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1992), 39.

tracts, sharing the gospel, holding prayer meetings, and preaching to the poor.<sup>13</sup> In one year, the Colportage Association reported 94 colporteurs engaged in the work, their sales amounting to £8,276, having paid 926,290 visits.<sup>14</sup> In addition to these two, dozens more charitable and evangelistic institutions would be founded during his pastorate at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. At Spurgeon's jubilee celebration, a deacon read a list of sixty-six institutions associated with the church. One of the most significant charitable institutions that Spurgeon founded was the Stockwell Orphanage, begun in 1866. Inspired by the example of George Muller, the orphanage cared for thousands of children through the years.<sup>15</sup>

Much more could be said about Spurgeon's ministry, impact, and popularity, as is evident from his many biographies. Each aspect of his ministry, from his preaching to his publications and to his institutions, is an astonishing story in itself and worthy of examination. However, among the many facets of Spurgeon's ministry, one important facet is sometimes overlooked. Spurgeon was not an itinerant preacher, or writer, or philanthropist. From his arrival in 1854 to his death in 1892, Spurgeon was the pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. He preached weekly and made arrangements for pulpit supply in his absence. He led the weekly prayer meetings. He administered the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. He examined each membership applicant. He provided leadership to the deacons and elders caring for the church, and under his leadership, the Metropolitan Tabernacle became "the largest church in Christendom."<sup>16</sup> Though the church had greatly diminished to a few dozen prior to his arrival, by the end of his ministry, it had a membership of over 5,000.<sup>17</sup> A total

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13. *Autobiography* 3:164.

14. *Ibid.*, 166.

15. Drummond, *Spurgeon*, 420, 430.

16. Eric Hayden, *Highlights in the Life of C. H. Spurgeon* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1990), 17.

17. Church Meeting Minutes 1889-1894, Metropolitan Tabernacle, Metropolitan Tabernacle Archives, London, Annual Church Meeting, March 1st 1893.

of 14,692 members were baptized and joined the church under Spurgeon's care.<sup>18</sup>

### **Spurgeon's Vision for the Church**

Widely known as the "Prince of Preachers," much attention has been given to Spurgeon's preaching, publishing ministry, charitable endeavors, and other activities. But undergirding all these ministries is the fact that, for almost forty years, he was quite simply the pastor of a local church. And as the pastor, he had a responsibility not only to preach the gospel but also to lead his church.

But did Spurgeon have a vision for the church? What was Spurgeon's ecclesiology, that is, his understanding of the doctrine of the church? Underneath that overarching question are many other questions about the nature and function of the church: What was Spurgeon's understanding of the universal church and its relation to local churches? Who held authority in the church? What were the historical roots of his ecclesiology? What was his view of local church governance? What was his understanding of the pastoral office? How did he seek to advance his understanding of the church? What role did his ecclesiology play amid the wider context and controversies of his day?

My contention is that Spurgeon most definitely had a vision for the church that was informed by his Reformed heritage and Baptist convictions and rooted in his understanding of Scripture. Even more, Spurgeon promoted and held fast to his vision for the church during a time when Nonconformist ecclesiology was in decline, due to three challenges: ritualism, revivalism, and rationalism. As Spurgeon battled these errors, he held fast to the classic understanding of the church militant, namely, that

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18. Hayden, *Highlights in the Life of C. H. Spurgeon*, 69. In previous writings, I reported that 13,797 members joined the church under Spurgeon's ministry. I arrived at that number by adding all the reported additions that were reported in the church's annual meeting minutes from 1854-1892. However, the 1892 annual meeting does not contain the additions for 1891 (understandable, given the church's grief over the loss of their pastor), so those numbers are incomplete. Hayden's numbers (14,692) are nearly 900 more than my calculations, far too many to account for the missing year. I'm not sure how Hayden arrived at his number but given that he was a pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, I will assume that his number is correct.

while on earth, the church is to be an army engaged in a fight for the truth.

### *Ecclesiology since the Reformation*

Spurgeon stood downstream from many debates about the nature of the church that were sparked by the Reformation. Late medieval Roman Catholicism had established the church and its elaborate sacramental system as the gatekeeper between man and salvation. But Luther's rediscovery of justification by faith meant that the church also needed to be rediscovered. His primary ecclesiological contribution was that the true church was to be rooted in the gospel. Apart from the gospel, there could be no church. In his *Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther argued that "the true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God."<sup>19</sup> While theologians of the previous centuries might have agreed with such a statement, Luther redefined terms like "gospel" and "grace" into "something... that many of these [former] theologians would not quite have been able to recognize or acknowledge"<sup>20</sup> and thus also brought a new understanding to the church. In his *Small Catechism*, Luther asked, "Where is this holy Christian Church to be found? This holy Christian Church is to be found *where the Gospel is in use*; for according to God's promise His Word shall not be preached in vain."<sup>21</sup> By focusing the church's very identity on Christ and the salvation found in Him, Luther not only created a basis from which to counteract Rome's ecclesiological abuses, but also paved the way for the Christological emphasis of future Protestant ecclesiology.

The next generation of reformers, led by Calvin and Melancthon, received Luther's ecclesiological foundation, and built on it. Having established the Christological center, these later reformers "took up the difficult task of determining with some

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19. Denis R. Janz, ed., *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2008), 88.

20. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 128.

21. Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 134.

precision its circumference,”<sup>22</sup> working towards the purity of the church according to God’s Word. Another group, the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, brought a new level of concern for the purity of the church. While this group contained some heretical streams, historians recognize that the evangelical Anabaptists, led by reformers like Balthasar Hubmaier and Menno Simons, stood within the tradition of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>23</sup> Their ecclesiology emphasized separation and purity. The church was a community of regenerated believers, marked off by believers’ baptism and the practice of church discipline (or “the ban”).<sup>24</sup> Their vision of the church would go on to influence future English Separatism, as well as the Church of the Brethren and English Quakers.<sup>25</sup>

In the English Reformation of the seventeenth century, ecclesiological debates centered on questions of church unity, schism, church governance, church and state, and related issues.<sup>26</sup> Puritanism was initially birthed within the Church of England as a reforming movement, aligned with the continental Reformed churches. As a result, it shared the concerns of Reformed Protestantism in ecclesiology, working towards biblical forms of church government, discipline, and worship.<sup>27</sup> Over the next two centuries, Puritanism would branch out of the Church of England in dissenting streams, represented most prominently by Presbyterians, Independents (or Congregationalists), and Baptists. Though each of these groups largely held the same reformed theology,<sup>28</sup> their understanding and practice of the church varied

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22. Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers, 25th Anniversary Edition* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), 243.

23. For example, see William Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 177-99, and George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 267-322.

24. George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 300-13.

25. *Ibid.*, 273-305.

26. Iain H. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church: A Collection of Reformed and Puritan Documents on Church Issues* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 7.

27. John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2-3.

28. The theological similarities among the English dissenting streams can be seen in their representative statements of faith. See “A Tabular Comparison of the 1646

in the areas of church authority, polity, and ministry. For these differences, the reformers would endure “much mental labor and often physical suffering in contending against religious abuses and setting forth scriptural principles.”<sup>29</sup>

The beginning of the eighteenth century saw the decline of evangelicalism due to several challenges, most notably the growing rationalism of the Enlightenment, which led to assaults on the orthodoxy of the churches. Even as dissenters had so recently gained some measure of religious freedom in the Toleration Act of 1689,<sup>30</sup> they were now hesitant to impose creedal tests on their ministers and churches.<sup>31</sup> Some denominations encountered a significant shift in their theology towards Unitarianism, including the English Presbyterians. However, the middle of the century saw a remarkable turning point: the Evangelical Revival. Sparked by the preaching of George Whitefield and John Wesley, evangelicalism experienced a recovery of evangelical theology and gospel preaching for conversion. Large numbers were converted, left the Church of England, and joined either a Methodist or one of the dissenting congregations. By the early nineteenth century, Congregationalists and Baptists had seen the most growth as a result of the revival.

### *Spurgeon's Ecclesiological Inheritance*

Spurgeon stood in theological continuity with the Protestant Reformation, his Puritan predecessors, and the Evangelical Revival. Converted in a Primitive Methodist church, he inherited a passion for preaching the gospel. From his very first sermon to the last one he preached,<sup>32</sup> Spurgeon pointed his hearers to the

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Westminster Confession of Faith, the 1658 Savoy Declaration of Faith, the 1677/1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith and the 1742 Philadelphia Confession of Faith,” Don Lowe and James Anderson, *cdli:wiki*, [https://www.proginosko.com/docs/wcf\\_sdfo\\_lbcf.html](https://www.proginosko.com/docs/wcf_sdfo_lbcf.html).

29. Murray, *Reformation of the Church*, 10.

30. Coffey, *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, 93.

31. Jesse Owens, “The Salters’ Hall Controversy: Heresy, Subscription, or Both?” *Perichoresis* Vol. 20.1 (2022), 35-52.

32. His very first sermon was from 1 Peter 2:7, “Unto you therefore which believe [Christ] is precious.” *Autobiography* 1:201.

saving work of Jesus, calling them to repentance and faith in Him. But beyond gospel preaching, Spurgeon also inherited his predecessors' concern for the purity of the church.<sup>33</sup> Spurgeon's prioritization of the local church can be traced throughout his life. A few weeks after his conversion, he applied for membership at the Congregational church in Newmarket and was accepted into membership on April 4, 1850.<sup>34</sup> For the next forty years until his death, he was a member in good standing in four different local churches.<sup>35</sup> While this church participation could be lost in the background of all his other ministries, Spurgeon's preaching reveals a much higher view of the church. Though his goal was always to preach Christ, Spurgeon understood that salvation in Christ could not be disconnected from the church. Preaching to his congregation in 1877, Spurgeon boldly used Cyprian's metaphor,<sup>36</sup> declaring,

We love the Church, which is our mother. I do hope that all the members of this church love the whole Church of God, and also have a special affection for that particular part of it in which they were born for God... it would be unnatural not to love the place where we were born into the heavenly family... We love the Church of God.<sup>37</sup>

Spurgeon's Reformed tradition meant that he was careful never to confuse the church and the gospel. Baptism, membership in the local church, or any other external participation in the church could never be a requirement for salvation. At the same time, he believed that commitment to the church ought to

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33. James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 266.

34. *Autobiography* 1:118-21.

35. Spurgeon was a member of the following four churches: April 4, 1850–October 3, 1850: Congregational Church, Newmarket; October 3, 1850–October 1851: St. Andrew's Street Baptist Church, Cambridge; October 1851–April 28, 1854–Waterbeach Chapel; April 28, 1854–January 31, 1892 – New Park Street Chapel / Metropolitan Tabernacle.

36. "He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother." *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, *Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 423.

37. *MTP* 42:477.

characterize every believer. As a Baptist, Spurgeon emphasized the importance of a public profession of faith through baptism. But this was a baptism into Christ,<sup>38</sup> which should lead to ongoing participation in the body of Christ through membership in a local church. Far from being a mere formality, Spurgeon's love for and commitment to the church was an integral part of his vision for the Christian life.

As a pastor, Spurgeon also held convictions from Scripture about how the church was to be ordered. A few years after being called as a pastor to the New Park Street Chapel, he led his congregation to institute the office of elders, because he believed this to be the New Testament practice.<sup>39</sup> He also believed that Scripture taught a congregational form of church government, where the congregation was the final authority of the church in matters of membership, discipline, leadership, and doctrine. He held to the independence of the church, where no extra-ecclesial body could exercise authority over the local church.<sup>40</sup> Not the elders, or deacons, or even Spurgeon himself could unilaterally make decisions in those areas for the rest of the church. At the same time, as the pastor, he was a commanding figure and exercised unmatched influence in his church. Therefore, while Spurgeon held to congregational principles, his polity also recognized the unique role of the pastor and the leadership roles of the elders and deacons.

In his day, Spurgeon recognized several ecclesiological challenges that undermined the orthodoxy of the church and the preaching of the gospel. As a result, his concern was not only for the purity of the church, but that the church would be engaged in the fight for the truth. Perhaps his favorite image for the church was that of an army, the church militant, which can be traced back to the early church fathers.<sup>41</sup> Spurgeon believed

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38. Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13.

39. *Autobiography* 3:22-23.

40. *MTP* 7:257.

41. One of the earliest instances of the distinction between the church militant and church triumphant can be found in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which was written around the first half of the second century. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria*

the church on earth was always at war, fighting for the defense and spread of the gospel. While his teaching remained focused on defending theological doctrines directly connected to the gospel, this fight also included how churches were to be ordered and guided.<sup>42</sup> Rationalism continued to challenge any doctrinal basis for churches and denominations. Many Baptist churches were moving beyond open communion to open membership, which compromised their distinctive understanding of baptism and of the church. The emphasis on individual salvation from the Evangelical Revival was morphing into a subjective approach to the ordinances, rooted in the experience of the individual rather than the accountability of the church.<sup>43</sup> The Oxford Movement in the Church of England continued to grow in influence, promoting a Roman Catholic view of the church, the sacraments, and the ministry. In these and other challenges, Spurgeon's ecclesiology took on a militant outlook.

### Sources and Layout

Theologians have noted how “one’s doctrine of the church is integrally related to one’s denominational and theological background.”<sup>44</sup> For Spurgeon, this was no different. His understanding of the church, his ecclesiology, was informed by his personal and theological background. Therefore, as we explore Spurgeon’s understanding of the church, we must connect it with his background and wider theology. But recognizing that he was first and foremost a pastor, we will also emphasize those points of his ecclesiology that connect most directly with the local church. For him, ecclesiology was manifested in the practical

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(*Entire*), ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 43.

42. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Greatest Fight in the World: The Final Manifesto* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2014).

43. Baptist leaders like John Clifford advocated for this view. See J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the 19th Century* (Didcot, UK: The Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 53. See also Michael Walker, *Baptists at the Table* (Didcot, UK: Baptist Historical Society, 1992), 184-85.

44. Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 231.

outworking of membership and discipline, pastoral ministry, church meetings, worship, and other aspects of day-to-day church life. By connecting Spurgeon's ecclesiology and church polity, and placing it in its wider context, we will examine an important area of Spurgeon's theology and practice.

Spurgeon never systematized his theology, nor did he write a manual of church polity.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, any attempts at systemizing his understanding and ordering of the church will have to rely on his large body of work, including his sermons, books, lectures, and letters. Some of the most important primary sources will be Spurgeon's sixty-three volumes of the *New Park Street Pulpit* and *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, his four-volume *Autobiography*, the twenty-seven annual volumes of his monthly magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*, and the Pastors' College lectures found in the four-volume set, *Lectures to My Students*, and in *An All-Round Ministry*. Other primary sources will include his other books and the recently published *Lost Sermons*,<sup>46</sup> which provide insight into Spurgeon's ecclesiology from his pastorate at Waterbeach.

Unpublished primary works will also be important to this study. The records from the Metropolitan Tabernacle archives are important and seldom accessed sources. These include the Church Meeting Minute Books, Elder Meeting Minute Books, Deacon Minute Books, and the Testimony Books. These books have survived multiple fires, bombings, and church reconstructions and remain accessible to researchers today. Additionally, the collection of Spurgeon-related personal letters and documents at the Angus Library in Regent's Park has been accessed for relevant material.

I have published another book, *Spurgeon the Pastor: Recovering a Biblical and Theological Vision for Ministry*,<sup>47</sup> that focuses

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45. The closest thing that exists is an article written by James A. Spurgeon, entitled "The Discipline of the Church at the Metropolitan Tabernacle." While an important primary source, this article is not a complete manual of church polity. *S&T* 1869:49-57.

46. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Lost Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon*, 7 vols. (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016-2022).

47. Geoffrey Chang, *Spurgeon the Pastor: Recovering a Biblical and Theological Vision for Ministry* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2022).

on Spurgeon's convictional approach to pastoral ministry. Undoubtedly, there will be some overlap between the contents of that book and the material in here. But in that book, I tried to answer more of the "how" of Spurgeon's pastoral ministry and avoided getting bogged down in church minutes and other details. In this work, I provide more historical and contextual research and focus more strictly on matters of church doctrine.

Having introduced Spurgeon's remarkable impact, his vision for the church, and his theological heritage here, the next chapter will focus on historical context. In particular, we will consider three challenges that contributed to ecclesiological decline among dissenters in the nineteenth-century: revivalism, ritualism, and rationalism. It is against the backdrop that Spurgeon sought to present his vision of the church as the army of God. The following chapter will narrow the lens, giving a brief biographical sketch of Spurgeon's early life, to demonstrate the various influences that shaped his commitment to the church from an early age.

The next six chapters will then present Spurgeon's vision for the church under three headings: his Reformed ecclesiology, his Baptist church polity, and his vision of the Church Militant. In chapters four and five, we will consider how Spurgeon stood squarely in the Reformed tradition in his ecclesiology, as we analyze his view of the local and universal church, the sacraments, the regulative principle, and more. In chapters six and seven, those theological ideas will be given more concrete expression as we examine how Spurgeon implemented his Baptist convictions in church membership and governance. Finally, in chapters eight and nine, we will define Spurgeon's vision for the militant church and show the priority of the church in two of his most important battles: the Baptismal Regeneration Controversy and the Downgrade Controversy. The conclusion will provide a summary of the argument, along with further contemporary reflections and applications.

Preaching in 1870, Spurgeon declared,

The proper study of the Christian is Christ. Next to that subject is the Church. And though I would by no means ever urge you so

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to think of the Church as for a moment to put her in comparison with her Lord yet think of her in relation to him. You will not dishonor the sun by remembering that there is a moon, you will not lessen the glory of “the King in his beauty” by remembering that the Queen, his Consort, is “all glorious within.” You will not think any the less of Christ for thinking much of his Church.<sup>48</sup>

Spurgeon thought much of Christ’s Church. It is our aim to unpack his thought on this important topic.

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48. *MTP* 60:433.