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Charles Haddon Spurgeon—A Passion for Preaching, Part Two

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Tuesday, September 21, 2004

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Spurgeon was, it must be granted, a particularly effective preacher. His voice was often described as “silvery” in its effect and intonation. His voice was powerful enough to be heard clearly by as many as 20,000 persons without amplification. His voice was heard by an estimated 10 million persons during his ministry—all before the invention of radio and television.

Once, when testing the acoustics of London’s spacious Agricultural Hall, Spurgeon shouted, “Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world.” A workman was later to tell Spurgeon that he had heard the words while working in the rafters, and had been led to faith in Christ.

As described by Harwood Pattison, “His voice was a powerful organ. Its first note, while it filled with ease the largest room, was so personal that each one of his hearers seemed to be especially addressed. . . . It was clarion in its powers to arouse, and lacked only a pathetic note to make it perfect.”

But Spurgeon’s voice, though unique, was not the secret of his pulpit power. A great many other Victorian divines were blessed with powerful voiceboxes and gifts of inflection.

The popular appeal of Spurgeon’s preaching could be traced, in part, to his unique method of crafting messages which were at once both rich in substance and clear in presentation. Spurgeon rejected the highbrow elegance of the aristocratic Victorians and preached using popular language and directness. He used illustrations from everyday life and current events, rather than the literary allusions common in Victorian sermons.

This approach had an immediate impact in London, starved for relevant preaching. “Not for a long time,” one observer noted, “had a prominent preacher condescended to preach the simple gospel in plain English, free from classical quotations and over-burdened rhetoric.” Spurgeon instructed his student preachers to read the Bible and the newspaper side-by-side, and he was a keen observer of his culture. Current events, he urged, illustrated timeless truths.

Spurgeon’s popular style won him both friends and enemies. Much of the response fell along class lines. Spurgeon came to prominence in London as the industrial revolution was in full sway. A new middle class of entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, and managers was emerging, and those persons found Spurgeon’s preaching compelling and understandable. They flocked to his services, joined by representatives of both the poor and the aristocratic.

After observing the young Spurgeon, James Grant wrote in the Morning Advertiser that Spurgeon “has evidently made George Whitefield his model, and, like that unparalleled preacher, that prince of pulpit orators, is very fond of striking apostrophes.”

Others were less taken with Spurgeon's approach. Older, more established ministers found the young upstart uncultured, at least in terms of current literature and classical references. Cartoons in the popular press portrayed Spurgeon as a young dynamo upsetting the comfort of the ensconced pulpit orators.

Spurgeon was, in fact, accused of theatrical tactics and manipulation. But, no less than Helmut Thielicke, who observed Nazi propaganda and manipulation first-hand, absolved Spurgeon of such methods. "Charles Haddon Spurgeon . . . was still unaware of the wiles of propaganda . . . He worked only through the power of the Word which created its own hearers and changed souls."

Spurgeon spoke with unusual directness and used references to everyday life. The Ipswich Express described Spurgeon's preaching as "redolent of bad taste, vulgar, and theatrical." But his style was vulgar only by the standards of Victorian aristocrats. For the remainder of Londoners, what the aristocracy described as "vulgar" was the stuff of everyday life.

Spurgeon was undeterred: "I am perhaps vulgar, but it is not intentional, save that I must and I will make the people listen. My firm conviction is that we have had quite enough polite preachers, and many require a change. God has owned me among the most degraded and off casts. Let others serve their class; these are mine, and to them I must keep."

Thielicke noted the "worldliness" of Spurgeon's sermons, even as he acknowledged the "homiletical risks" Spurgeon chose to take. "The dogmatician, the exegete, and also professor of practical theology may often be impelled to wield their blue pencils; the aesthete may often see red and the liturgiologists turn purple when they read his sermons and hear what he did. For the priests and the Levites always have the hardest time listening with simplicity and without bias."

To Thielicke, this worldliness was the glory—not the scandal—of Spurgeon's preaching. "Such critics ought to see this man Spurgeon the shepherd who was willing to allow his robe—including his clerical robe—to be torn to tatters by thorns and sharp stones as he clambered after the lost sheep . . . Worldly preaching is impossible without having the earth leave its traces on a man's wardrobe. Here there are no robes that look as if they had just come out of a sandbox."

Spurgeon's humor, said Thielicke, is "Easter laughter," the laughter which comes as a "mode of redemption because it is sanctified—because it grows out of an overcoming of the world. . . ."

But Spurgeon's homiletical method—revolutionary and effective though it was—was not the foundation of his ministry nor the source of his power. The real foundation of his power was Christian conviction. Long before Charles Spurgeon was a great preacher, he was a great believer—a man possessed by deep passion for the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

