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Charles Haddon Spurgeon—A Passion for Preaching, Part One

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Today, the church is still blessed by outstanding expositors, but they are too few. Many preachers lack adequate models and mentors, and they find themselves hungry for a homiletical model who can both inspire and instruct. In Victorian London, there once was a preacher whose power and conviction shaped an entire culture. It is time for a new look at the ministry of Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

“In the midst of the theologically discredited nineteenth century there was a preacher who had at least six thousand people in his congregation every Sunday, whose sermons for many years were cabled to New York every Monday and reprinted in the leading newspapers of the country, and who occupied the same pulpit for almost forty years without any diminishment in the flowing abundance of his preaching and without ever repeating himself or preaching himself dry. The fire he thus kindled, and turned into a beacon that shone across the seas and down through generations, was no mere brush fire of sensationalism, but an inexhaustible blaze that glowed and burned on solid hearths and was fed by the wells of the eternal Word. Here was the miracle of a bush that burned with fire and yet was not consumed.”

Thus commented Helmut Thielicke on Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the greatest Victorian preacher and one of the greatest princes of the pulpit to serve the church in any age.

Spurgeon was a legend in his own day, and was a household name in London before he reached the age of twenty. Yet his popularity has continued into the twenty-first century, and his voluminous writings are still among the best-selling devotional and homiletical materials currently available. What can explain this phenomenon?

The Victorian age was noted as an era of princely preachers, and London—with the British empire then at its height—was the setting for many of the greatest pulpit ministries in the history of the church. But Spurgeon stands alone as the most widely appreciated and influential preacher of his century.

The background of Spurgeon's life is unremarkable. Born June 19, 1834 at Kelvedon in Essex, Spurgeon entered life the son and grandson of Congregational ministers. Spurgeon's father, John Spurgeon, was what would now be known as a bi-vocational preacher, serving a largely itinerant ministry. But Charles' grandfather, James Spurgeon, was a well-known Congregational minister. Charles spent most of his childhood in his grandfather's manse at Stambourne. There he was exposed to a warm-hearted devotion and to his grandfather's extensive library of Puritan theology.

The Spurgeon family early noticed a particular sense of spiritual urgency in young Charles, and the parish manse was a healthy place for Spurgeon to indulge in rather precocious theological investigations. The catalyst for his theological development was his grandfather's library of Puritan classics. In an attic loft Spurgeon spent many boyhood days in the company of Richard Sibbes, John Owen, Richard Baxter, and John Bunyan—especially Bunyan.

Spurgeon's disquietude was not eased until January 6, 1850, when he was converted during a meeting at the Primitive Methodist chapel at Colchester. His testimony of that day was of a burden released. As he would write in his Autobiography: "The frown of God no longer resteth upon me; but my Father smiles, I can see His eyes—they are glancing love; I hear His voice—it is full of sweetness. I am forgiven, I am forgiven, I am forgiven!" Spurgeon was soon to join a Baptist Church, driven to the conviction of believer's baptism by his own study of the Bible.

Within a matter of months, Spurgeon would preach his first sermon, tricked into doing so by an older friend who encouraged him to go to a meeting at a Teversham cottage, where a promising young man was to preach his first sermon. As he was later to relate, "It seemed a great risk and a serious trial; but depending upon the power of the Holy Ghost, I would at least tell out the story of the cross, and not allow the people to go home without a word."

That would be Spurgeon's practice and pledge for the remainder of his remarkable ministry. By the next year, Spurgeon had been called as pastor of a small chapel at Waterbeach, where his reputation soon expanded throughout the Cambridgeshire area. By 1853, his reputation took him to the pulpit of the famed New Park Street Baptist Church in London.

The New Park Baptist Church had once been numbered among London's most famous and well-attended churches. Previous pastors had included Benjamin Keach, John Gill, and John Rippon. But the 1200-seat sanctuary held only about one hundred when Spurgeon arrived to preach a guest sermon. Within eighteen months, the congregation would be forced into the cavernous Exeter Hall in order to accommodate the thousands who came to hear their preacher.

The scene would shift in 1861 to the newly constructed Metropolitan Tabernacle in south London, where Spurgeon would draw a congregation of no less than 6,000 persons for thirty years.

His unprecedented ministry defies summarization, but one homiletical resource states it in stark terms: "Before he was twenty a significant church in London called him as pastor. Within two years he was preaching to audiences of 10,000 people; at twenty-two he was the most popular preacher of his day. By the time he was twenty-seven, a church seating 6,000 people had been built to accommodate the crowds which flocked to hear him preach. For over thirty years he pastored the same church without decrease in power or appeal."

Indeed, Spurgeon dominated the pulpit of his age like a Colossus, with his services drawing thousands and his printed sermons hitting the streets within hours of their pulpit delivery. The defining characteristic of Spurgeon's ministry is precisely what is missing from so many pulpits today—an undiluted passion for the exposition and proclamation of God's Word. Can such passion be recovered?

