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# Charles Haddon Spurgeon—A Passion for Preaching, Part Three

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Spurgeon's homiletical method—revolutionary and effective though it was—was not the foundation of his ministry nor the source of his power. Preaching was for Spurgeon first and foremost a matter of conviction, even before it blossomed into communication.

While the Victorians often minimized doctrine and the Tractarians taught their theory of doctrinal “reserve,” Spurgeon preached a full-bodied gospel with substantive content and unashamed conviction. In this he was regarded as something of an exception, but he held fast to his biblical faith, Calvinist convictions, and evangelistic appeal.

“I take my text and make a bee-line to the cross,” explained Spurgeon, and that brief statement is Spurgeon's preaching method in sum. He would often preach as many as five to seven sermons a week, but Sunday sermons at the Metropolitan Tabernacle consumed most of his energies in preparation. Spurgeon would seek texts for his Sunday sermons throughout the week, seeking through prayer, Bible reading, and conversation with friends (especially his devoted wife, Susannah) to find the most appropriate text for Sunday's sermons.

On Saturday night, he would sequester himself away from family and friends by six o'clock and remain in his study until the morning message was in outline form. From that outline, Spurgeon would preach an extemporaneous message lasting forty-five minutes to an hour, on average.

Spurgeon found the identification of the text his most vexing challenge, and it consumed much of his energies during the week. “A man who goes up and down from Monday morning until Saturday night, and indolently dreams that he is to have his text sent down by an angelic messenger in that last hour or two of the week, tempts God, and deserves to stand speechless on the Sabbath,” he charged.

His own struggle is made clear in this reflective passage: “I have often said that my greatest difficulty is to fix my mind upon the particular texts which are to be the subjects of discourse on the following day. . . . As soon as any passage of Scripture really grips my heart and soul I concentrate my whole attention upon it, look at the precise meaning of the original, closely examine the context so as to see the special aspect of the text in its surroundings, and roughly jot down all the thoughts that occur to me concerning the subject, leaving to a later period the orderly marshalling of them for presentation to my hearers.”

But whatever the text—Old Testament or New Testament—Spurgeon would find his way to the gospel of the Savior on the cross. And that gospel was put forth with the full force of substitutionary atonement and with warnings of eternal punishment but for the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

That uncompromising message was offensive to some even in Victorian England. Some chose to admire Spurgeon's preaching ministry while ignoring or minimizing his theology. This Spurgeon will not allow. As Iain Murray states: "The only way to deal with Spurgeon's theology is to accept it or forget it: the latter is what I believe has largely happened in the twentieth century. And Spurgeon without his theology is about as distorted as the cheap china figures of Spurgeon which were offered for sale by charlatans more than a century ago."

The famous preacher found himself engaged in several heated theological disputes, ranging from debates over baptismal regeneration to the infamous "Downgrade Controversy" of his final years. In each of these, he attempted to maintain clear evangelical conviction, while keeping the focus on the gospel.

He resisted any compromise on substitutionary atonement, the authority and inspiration of Scripture, eternal punishment for unbelievers, original sin, and the absoluteness of Christianity. The lack of emphasis on substitutionary atonement which marked many of his contemporaries troubled Spurgeon, for he saw no genuine gospel in any preaching which was embarrassed by Scriptural witness to what God in Christ did on behalf of the redeemed.

As he stated: "I have always considered, with Luther and Calvin, that the sum and substance of the gospel lies in that word Substitution—Christ standing in the stead of man. If I understand the gospel, it is this: I deserve to be lost forever; the only reason why I should not be damned is this, that Christ was punished in my stead, and there is no need to execute a sentence twice for sin."

Spurgeon was concerned with the function and effectiveness of the sermon. A student at his famous pastor's college once asked how he could focus more clearly on bringing believers into the faith. "Do you expect converts every time you preach?" Spurgeon asked. The student quickly retorted, "Of course not." And the reply came back: "That is why you have none."

But Spurgeon made content his concern, trusting that God would use the substance of his message to penetrate the hearts of his hearers. "Sermons should have real teaching in them, and their doctrine should be solid, substantial, and abundant. We do not enter the pulpit to talk for talk's sake; we have instructions to convey, important to the last degree, and we cannot afford to utter pretty nothings."

He warned his students to evaluate their sermons by content—and not by structure or design. "To divide a sermon well may be a very useful art, but how if there is nothing to divide? . . . The grandest discourse ever delivered is an ostentatious failure if the doctrine of the grace of God be absent from it; it sweeps over men's heads like a cloud, but it distributes no rain upon the thirsty earth; and therefore the remembrance of it to souls taught wisdom by an experience of pressing need is one of disappointment, or worse."

"Brethren," he pleaded, "weigh your sermons. Do not retail them by the yard, but deal them out by the pound. Set no store by the quantity of words which you utter, but try to be esteemed for the quality of your matter."

Spurgeon held fast to Calvinist theology, even as he extended a universal appeal to the gospel. When asked how he could reconcile his understanding of election and his evangelistic appeal, he retorted quickly: "I do not try to reconcile friends."

That quality of vigor and vitality produced one of the most remarkable ministries of the church in the modern age—or any age for that matter. Upon Spurgeon's death, Texan B.H. Carroll was moved to deliver an address celebrating his British colleague's life and ministry: "With whom among men can you compare him? He combined the preaching power of Jonathan Edwards and Whitefield with the organizing power of Wesley, and the energy, fire, and courage of Luther. In many respects he was most like Luther. In many, most like Paul."

But Spurgeon never intended to be the center of attention, in life or in death. He would point to the cross. As Thielicke stated plainly, "His message never ran dry because he was never anything but a recipient." Spurgeon would be quick to affirm Thielicke's point. He preached the grace of God with such power because he had experienced the grace of God.

In our era—distanced by more than a century from Charles Spurgeon—we would do well to remember this great man and the impact of his ministry. Beyond this, we should be reminded of the centrality of biblical confidence and theological conviction to the preaching task. Where are the Spurgeons of this generation?

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