



Charles Hadden Spurgeon

1834 – 1892

Everything about him seems prodigious. Typically absorbing six books per week, he expanded his personal library until it contained 12,000 volumes. In an era that had not yet been introduced to sound-amplification, he could address an audience of 23,000 without a public address system. In 1865 his sermons sold 25,000 copies per week and were translated into over twenty languages. Members of his congregation were occasionally asked not to attend next Sunday's service so that newcomers might find a seat.

C.H. Spurgeon was born in Kelvington, Essex, in a part of England that cherished the memories of stalwart Christians who had counted no price too dear for the faith that saves. The Reformation martyrs who had burned at the stake, as well as John Bunyan (imprisoned for thirteen years), encouraged the young man whose courage would later be called for again and again but never questioned.

In 1850 the teenager became aware of persistent spiritual need. Determined though he was to attend services at his family's church, a snowstorm re-routed him to a sparsely-attended Methodist chapel. The preacher that day was earnest but not eloquent. Having little to say, he filled up the time allotted for the sermon by continually repeating his text: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is none other" (Isaiah 45:22). It was enough. The formation of England's most powerful Christian spokesperson was under way. Within a year his theological grasp and spiritual discernment

were awesome. By the time he was nineteen he had been called to one of the largest Baptist congregations in London.

His detractors, preoccupied with the shallow niceties and “good taste” of Victorian England, criticized him relentlessly. “Clerical poltroon” (a poltroon is a spiritless coward), “pulpit buffoon,” “demagogue,” they sniffed at him dismissively, comparing him to a circus performer who entertains the masses mindlessly. As it happens, his sermons are still read today, and in printed form fill sixty-three volumes, equal to the contents of the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Helmut Thielicke, a leading Lutheran theologian and veteran of the German church struggle, advised his post-World War II seminarians to sell whatever books they owned in order to buy Spurgeon!

Through humour Spurgeon ensured that his critics did not unsettle him or deflect him. “He stinketh,” first said of Lazarus and now said of Spurgeon himself, merely proved that Spurgeon *had* been buried with Christ and was now dead to the world’s slander.

Yet not even his gift of humour could rid him of the horror that would haunt him for the rest of his life. On an October evening in 1856 Surrey Hall was filled to capacity with a crowd of 12,000, while another 10,000 pressed on the building from outside. Part way through the service, several of Spurgeon’s opponents shouted “Fire!” Seven people died in the panic that ensued; 28 others were hospitalized. Spurgeon himself was carried from the pulpit and hidden away in a friend’s home. Later he was to say that the nightmare had brought him to the verge of insanity.

In truth, his health was never robust. Each year found him in bed for weeks at a time with a variety of ailments, including chronic inflammation of the kidneys. Not least among his miseries was an inclination to recurring bouts of depression. (No doubt exhaustion had much to do with this. He had oversight of a congregation of 4,000 members, preached every Sunday, conducted weddings and funerals, edited a magazine, and dealt with 500 letters each week.)

Appalled at the housing conditions in London and determined to have the congregation “show our love of truth by truthful love,” Spurgeon established the Stockwell Orphanage. As attacks against his evangelical stance mounted, Spurgeon had a response: “The orphanage is an eloquent answer to the sneers of infidels and scoffers of the

modern school who would fain make it out that our charity lies in bigoted zeal for doctrines but does not produce practical results. Are any of the new theologians doing more? . . . What does their socialism amount to beyond words and theory?" Political injustices were addressed with the same forthrightness. Tirelessly he advocated the removal of special privileges for the Church of England, arguing as well that any qualified student should be able to attend Oxford or Cambridge University, and that any non-Anglican pastor should have the right to bury his people in parish graveyards.

Believing that "each man should give his vote with as much devotion as he prays" Spurgeon denounced Home Rule for Ireland and governmental neglect of education in England. His strongest criticism he reserved for American slavery. When publishers in the United States began deleting references to slavery in American editions of his books Spurgeon redoubled his insistence that slavery was a "soul-destroying sin."

Like John Calvin before him, Spurgeon devoted himself to the preparation of preachers. His Pastors' College schooled hundreds. The instructors were working pastors who modelled both academic rigour and pastoral excellence.

Yet it was the writings of the Puritans that effervesced in him throughout his ministry. In these works he claimed to have found what every minister needs but which few seminaries seem able to provide: rigorous theology, warm faith, and practical pastoral wisdom. Despite the thousands of Puritan volumes on his shelves, however, Spurgeon was aware that it is suffering, in the end, that shapes the pastor as nothing else can. The prince of preachers who had suffered so much himself maintained to the end that "affliction . . . is the best book in a minister's library."

