

## CHARLES SPURGEON

### The Puritan Prince of Preachers

In an age of great preachers the greatest was Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892).

Born and raised in rural Essex, Charles Spurgeon came from a line of solid dissenting ancestors. Both his father and his grandfather were independent congregational ministers. Charles was born in 1834 in Kelvedon, Essex, an area with a long tradition of Protestant resistance to Catholicism dating back to the persecutions of “*Bloody Mary*” in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

#### A Son of the Manse

Charles was a “*son of the manse.*” His earliest childhood memories were of listening to sermons, learning Hymns and looking at the pictures in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*. Charles first read *The Pilgrim’s Progress* at age six and went on to read it over 100 times. He would later recommend *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* as “*the perfect Christmas gift for a child.*” He regarded *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* as one of the most significant books he ever read. It vividly shaped his attitudes towards established religions, the tyranny of Rome and the glory of the Reformation. His childhood heroes were the brave Protestants who were burned at Smithsfield, and the valiant Puritans such as John Bunyan, who were jailed for their Faith.

Because his parents were destitute, during his formative years, Charles was raised by his grandparents. At age seven he returned to his parents’ home where his mother lovingly taught him the Scriptures. Charles Spurgeon’s mother had seventeen children, nine of whom died in infancy.

#### A Prophetic Word

When Charles was only ten years old, a visiting missionary Rev. Richard Knill, who had come to preach at Stanborne at the invitation of Rev. John Spurgeon, was struck by how young Charles read the Bible with such emphasis. After breakfast he walked in the garden with Charles speaking of the Lord and His service. They knelt together in the garden and Pastor Knill poured out a vibrant and earnest intercessory prayer on behalf of young Charles.

Before leaving the manse, Richard Knill called the family together, drew Charles to his knee and said: “*I do not know how, but I feel a solemn presentiment that this child will preach the Gospel to thousands and God will bless him to many souls. So sure am I of this that when my little man preaches in Surrey Music Hall, as he will do one day, I should like him to promise me that he will give out the Hymn commencing ‘God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.’*”  
(This was fulfilled in 1856 when Charles was 21 years old.)

#### A Precocious Child

Rev. John Spurgeon was very devoted to his grandson Charles. It was his custom to allow Charles to read the Scriptures at family worship. Visitors commented on the skill with which the young boy read with such emphasis and “*unerring correctness.*”

His grandfather related the story that when Charles was only six years old he overheard his grandfather deploring the drinking habits of one of his congregation who frequented the local pub. Young Charles declared: “*I will kill him!*” Shortly afterwards he informed his grandfather that he had “*killed old Rhodes. He will never grieve my poor grandfather anymore!*”

“*What do you mean my child?*” asked his grandfather.

“*I’ve been about the Lord’s work!*” declared young Charles. His grandfather solved the mystery when Rhodes himself explained to him that Charles had come to him in the public house and declared: “*What*

*doest thou here? Sitting with the ungodly, you a member of a church, and break your pastors heart! I am ashamed of you!"* The man was angry for a moment, but then he came to the conviction that this young child was right and he determined to repent and never again turn to drink at the tavern.

### **Converted to Christ**

Charles' formal education was minimal. However he devoured his grandfather's Puritan books and was well read. He attended a local school for a few years, and then for a brief time was an usher (or teaching assistant) at an Anglican school in New Market. In 1849, when Charles was fifteen years old, under conviction of sin and anxious to know forgiveness, he was obliged to stop on the road due to a snow storm. He found himself in a Primitive Methodist chapel in Colchester.

As the service progressed it appeared that the minister would not arrive. At last a very thin deacon came into the pulpit opened his Bible and read: *"Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth."* And then apparently looking straight at Charles Spurgeon he declared: *"Young man, you are in trouble! You will never get out of it unless you look to Christ!"* He then lifted up his hands and exclaimed repeatedly: *"Look! Look! Look!"* Spurgeon later wrote: *"I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard this word, 'Look' – what a charming word it seemed to me! Oh, I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away, and in Heaven I will look on still in my joy unutterable."*

Charles later wrote of the day of his conversion: *"And as the snow fell on the road home from the little House of Prayer, I thought that every snowflake talked with me and told me of the pardon I had found for I was white as the driven snow through the grace of God."* Upon his return home, his appearance caused his mother to exclaim: *"Something wonderful has happened to you!"*

### **Believer's Baptism**

For the next months Charles searched the Scriptures *"to know more fully the value of the jewel which God had given me...I found that believers ought to be baptised."* And so, four months after his conversion, he was baptised by immersion in the River Lark, May 1850. He vowed to spend his life *"in the extension of Christ's cause, in whatsoever way He pleases."*

His mother had often prayed: *"Oh that my son might live for Thee."* However, she was shocked when, in what appeared to be youthful rebellion, Charles broke with the congregational tradition of his family and was baptised by full immersion in the River Lark in May 1850, joining a Baptist Church. His mother exclaimed *"Charlie, I have often prayed that you might be saved, but never that you should become a Baptist."* To this Charles replied: *"God has answered your prayer, Mother, with His usual bounty, and has given me more than you asked."*

### **Called to Preach**

Charles preached his first sermon at the age of sixteen before a small congregation of farm labourers and their wives in a thatched chapel in Teversham. Then, moving to a school in Cambridge, he joined St. Andrews Street Baptist Church and became a village preacher. Waterbeach Baptist Chapel invited Charles to become their pastor. His very young appearance was in startling contrast to the maturity of his sermons.

### **An Heir to the Puritans**

All the great Puritan books that he had devoured in his grandfather's house came to the fore. He had a retentive memory, youthful energy and great oratorical skills. This made such an impact that people travelled to hear the *"boy preacher."* Within eighteen months his reputation had spread to London, and he was invited to preach at the historic New Park Street Chapel.

### **A Time of Crisis**

Charles Spurgeon was 19 years old when he began his pastorate at the famous but rundown New Park Street Baptist Church in Southwark. It was March 1854 when Spurgeon began his ministry in London. It was a time of tremendous economic and social upheaval. A plague of cholera hit London in 1854 and

20,000 people died in this epidemic. Also in that year the Crimean War broke out, the first war involving the major European powers since the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 ended the Napoleonic wars.

This was followed with the Indian Mutiny of 1857 which provoked such a tremendous outpouring of grief and rage leading to a national day of fasting and humiliation during which Charles Spurgeon was invited to address the largest audience of his life: almost 24,000 people gathered in the Crystal Palace. The disruptions and economic hardships caused by the American Civil War in the 1860's also brought much suffering and economic ruin to many in London.

### **A Calvinist Evangelist**

Very conscious of his youth and inexperience Charles Spurgeon prayed that "*these may not hinder my usefulness.*" Charles Spurgeon deliberately built upon the Calvinist teachings and Puritan Devotion of George Whitefield and he soon became the most popular preacher in London. When Spurgeon arrived at the New Park Street Baptist Church the congregation had 232 members. By the end of his pastorate, 38 years later, the membership had increased to 5,311. Altogether 14,460 people were added to the congregation during Spurgeon's tenure. He built New Park into the largest independent congregation in the world.

Coinciding with such tumultuous international events and domestic distress, in the greatest city in the world at that time, his ministry immediately attracted huge excitement and attention. Soon it was necessary to extend the premises and for three months the church met at Exeter Hall in the Strand where crowds filled all 4,500 seats each Sunday. The meetings were switched to the Music Hall in Surrey Gardens while the possibility of building new church premises was discussed.

### **Innovative and Inspiring**

Spurgeon was described as a compelling, charismatic speaker "*dramatic to his fingertips.*" He frequently acted the parts in Biblical stories, pacing the platform and even running from side to side. His sermons were filled with heart rending stories that ordinary people could relate to: of dying children, grieving parents, repentant harlots and servants wiser than their masters. Spurgeon's language was graphic, emotionally charged and compelling. The dramatic devices employed by Spurgeon have now become commonplace, but they were quite shocking for the mid-Victorian years. His many critics roundly condemned the young minister's style, manner and appearance. Many ministers were openly contemptuous of his "*sensationalism*", although it was later pointed out that many of them came to copy his style and even appropriate his sermons.

### **A Model Marriage**

In 1856 Charles Spurgeon married Susannah Thompson, a member of his congregation and a daughter of a prosperous ribbon manufacturer. She was described as "*trim, pretty, and stylishly dressed.*" By her account, it was not love at first sight. She was highly critical of the young preachers' style. However, he was a persistent suitor. By all accounts their marriage was a very loving one and a source of strength and comfort to them both, although both suffered from periodic illness and invalidism. Within the year of their marriage they were parents of twin boys, Charles and Thomas. Both grew up to be preachers. Thomas succeeded his father as pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle and Charles Jnr. took charge of the orphanage his father had founded.

### **“Prove Me Now”**

On the evening of 19 October 1856, Charles Spurgeon was to commence weekly services at the Royal Surrey Gardens Music Hall. That morning he preached at New Park Street Chapel on Malachi 3:10 "*Prove Me now...*" He declared "*...I may be called to stand where the thunderclouds brew, where the lightnings play, and tempestuous winds are howling on the mountain top. Well then, I am born to prove the power and majesty of our God. Amidst dangers He will inspire me with courage; amidst toils He will make me strong...we shall be gathered together tonight where an unprecedented mass of people will assemble, perhaps from idle curiosity, to hear God's Word; and a voice cries in my ears, 'Prove Me now...'*"

## **Tragedy Strikes**

That evening Surrey Hall, designed to hold up to 12,000, was overflowing with over 22,000 people. The service was underway when, during Spurgeon's prayer, several malicious individuals shouted: "*Fire! The galleries are giving way! Fire!*" In the ensuing panic seven people died and twenty eight were hospitalized from the stampede to evacuate the building.

This tragedy almost ended Spurgeon's ministry. He had to be carried from the pulpit to a friend's house where he remained for several days in deep, dark depression. He later remarked: "*Perhaps never a soul went so near the burning furnace of insanity, and yet came away unharmed.*" Spurgeon later said that the fire at Surrey Gardens was "*sufficient to shatter my reason*" and "*silence my ministry forever.*"

Shortly after this Spurgeon had his first episode of incapacitating illness and he frequently suffered from depression. As he once commented: "*Despondency is not a virtue; I believe it is a vice. I'm heartily ashamed of myself for falling into it...*"

## **The Metropolitan Tabernacle**

Proposals to build a new church were agreed in 1858. At Spurgeon's request it's design was to be in the Greek style, for "*Greek is the sacred tongue*" in which the New Testament had been revealed. When the Metropolitan Tabernacle was opened in March 1861 it was the largest place of worship for dissenters in the land, seating over 5,000 people. At first there was no organ and a man with a tuning fork led the singing. Most of Spurgeon's congregation were lower middle class with the congregation evenly divided between males and females. Every person who joined his huge congregation was personally interviewed by Spurgeon who wanted to ensure that each candidate's conversion was genuine. He ran his congregation with a firm hand.

## **Intense Opposition**

During his early years in London Spurgeon received intense slander and scorn. He wrote of a "*devastating bitterness of soul.*" He wavered between rejoicing in the persecutions he received and "*being utterly crushed by it.*" He wrote of being "*the laughing stock of fools and the song of the drunkard.*"

## **The Greatest Preacher of his Age**

During his lifetime Spurgeon is estimated to have preached to 10 million people, face-to-face. The theme for Spurgeon's Sunday morning sermon was usually not chosen until Saturday night, and the Sunday evening sermon was normally prepared on Sunday afternoon. He spoke at a rate of 140 words per minute for an average of 40 minutes. Including funerals, weddings, and other invitations, Spurgeon often preached ten times a week. Before he was 20 Charles had preached over 600 times. He typically read six books a week and could remember what he had read, and where, even years later. He built up an awesome personal library containing 12,000 volumes, 1,000 of which had been printed before 1700.

Spurgeon's Sunday sermons were delivered extemporaneously with seldom more than a one page outline before him. These sermons were taken down in shorthand by a secretary appointed by the congregation, and revised by him on Monday mornings. These sermons were published every Thursday, translated into several languages, and even sold as far afield as Australia and America. In 1865 Spurgeon's sermons were selling 25,000 copies every week. They were translated into more than 20 languages. Spurgeon's sermons were issued weekly until 1917, by which time sales had totaled over 100 million copies.

Testing the acoustics in the vast agricultural hall, Spurgeon shouted: "*Behold, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world!*" A worker high in the rafters of the building heard this and became converted to Christ as a result.

## **The Most Prolific Christian Author of All Time**

Throughout his ministry Spurgeon proved to be a prolific writer. He edited a monthly magazine *Sword and Trowel*, wrote several books and commentaries, and produced sermons notes and lecture notes for his students.

Charles Hadden Spurgeon is historically the most widely read preacher (apart from Biblical ones). Today there is more material available written by Charles Spurgeon than by any other Christian author, living or dead. The *New Park Street Pulpit* and the *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit – The Collected Sermons of Spurgeon* – fill 63 volumes. The over 20 million words of these sermons are equivalent to 27 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica. Spurgeon's sermon series stand out as the largest set of books by single author in the history of Christianity. At least three of Spurgeon's works (including the multi-volumed *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Series*) have sold more than a million copies. One of these three best-sellers, *All of Grace*, was the first book ever published by Moody Press and is still its all-time bestseller.

He spent 20 years studying the Book of Psalms and writing his commentary on them, *The Treasury of David*, considered his greatest work.

## **Famous Contemporaries**

Charles Spurgeon drew to his services the prime minister William Gladstone, members of the Royal Family, members of Parliament, Florence Nightingale, General James Garfield, later President of the United States, American evangelist D.L. Moody and missionary David Livingstone. Commenting on Spurgeon's practice of working an average of 18 hours a day, Livingstone asked him: "*How do you manage to do two men's work in a single day?*" Spurgeon replied: "*You have forgotten that there are two of us!*"

## **Hudson Taylor and George Müller**

Spurgeon often met with China Inland Mission founder Hudson Taylor and the famous founder of orphanages, George Müller. Charles paid several visits to Ashley Down, Bristol, to talk with that "*heavenly-minded man*" George Muller. He was astounded by Muller's stories of living by Faith. Charles once said that if he could change bodies with anyone it would be with George Muller – for both time and eternity! They often spent whole days together, stimulating one another's Faith by discussing the unfailing promises of God.

When in 1867 Charles was offered £20,000 to start an orphanage, he immediately suggested that the donor rather give it to George Muller. Her insistence that Spurgeon must keep the gift and start an orphanage himself, launched him on his famous orphanage ministry which he carefully patterned upon Muller's.

## **W.E. Gladstone**

The four times Prime Minister of England, W.E. Gladstone, visited the Tabernacle to hear Spurgeon preach and was criticised for receiving this dissenting preacher Charles Spurgeon for lunch or breakfast at 10 Downing Street on a number of occasions. Prime Minister Gladstone was described as a man of principle and prayer. Educated at Eton and Oxford he became a conservative Member of Parliament for Newark. His first important speech called for the emancipation of slaves.

## **Lord Shaftsbury**

The 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftsbury was 33 years Spurgeon's senior, but they became firm friends. They corresponded frequently and met at Spurgeon's London home and at his holiday home in the South of France. Spurgeon described Lord Shaftsbury as "*a real nobleman and a man of God.*" Shaftsbury became President of a mission associated with Spurgeon's Tabernacle that ministered to street vendors. It was Lord Shaftsbury who chaired Spurgeon's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations in the Tabernacle and Spurgeon was present at Shaftsbury's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Lord Shaftsbury was tireless and compassionate on behalf of the poor and he greatly improved the working conditions of women and children in the mines and factories. He also supported many foreign missions.

## **William Booth**

William Booth was also converted in his teens and became a worker for the Lord within days of his conversion. Spurgeon supported William Booth's "*holy activities*" and commended him for "*stirring the masses of London.*" Spurgeon had William Booth lecture at his pastor's college and William Booth invited Spurgeon to minister at his mission hall in Whitechapel.

## **D.L. Moody**

On arriving in England for the first time in 1867, American evangelist D.L. Moody made straight for the Tabernacle and sat in the gallery. When back home he was asked if he had seen various tourist sights or cathedrals, Moody responded: "*No, but I've heard Spurgeon!*" D.L. Moody wrote that: "*Heaven came down*" on his soul and he returned to America "*a better man.*" In spite of Moody's Arminian views, he invited the staunch Calvinist Charles Spurgeon to preach at the Moody and Sankey Crusades in Bow Road Hall. Spurgeon also invited Moody to preach in the Tabernacle on his Jubilee celebrations in 1884. Both Moody and Spurgeon founded colleges and began their Christian work among children.

## **Pastor's College**

Although Charles Spurgeon trained many pastors, he himself had received no theological training. He related an incident where a servant girl had inadvertently shown him in to the wrong room, missing the principal with whom he had an interview. Later he determined not to reapply for admission believing that God had spoken to him: "*Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not!*"

Baptists had a long tradition of ordaining ministers, but Spurgeon managed to get his church to omit this step – he never was ordained. He campaigned arduously to do without the customary title, *Reverend*, and he eventually succeeded in replacing it with *Pastor*.

To further the work of the Gospel, Spurgeon established his pastors college at Camberwell. He made himself responsible for a weekly lecture there and published his notes in *Lectures to My Students*, which remains a major textbook in Baptist colleges to this day. Nearly 900 students were trained at Spurgeon's college during his lifetime. After his death the college was renamed Spurgeon's College and relocated to South Norwood. Spurgeon's College continues to this day.

## **The Stockwell Orphanage**

In 1866 a gift of £20,000 enabled him to found an orphanage at Stockwell, providing a home and education for 500 homeless boys and girls.

## **Bibles for Britain**

In the same year he formed the Colportage Association to give country people the opportunity to buy Christian books and Bibles at low cost. In one year alone his 96 colporteurs sold 23,000 Bibles. His Book Fund provided multitudes of pastors with resources for Biblical preaching.

## **A Centre of Controversy**

Charles Spurgeon was a man of strong convictions and was often the centre of controversy. Although he was an eloquent and persuasive speaker, he was not a good debater and paid a heavy price, both emotionally and physically for his involvement in theological and political controversies.

The German theologian Helmut Thielicke declared: "*Sell all that your have and buy Spurgeon!*" But many preachers condemned Spurgeon's doctrine and delivery. Criticising his Puritan Faith, one pastor asked Spurgeon how he could reconcile his Calvinist theology with his fervent evangelism. Charles Spurgeon replied: "*I do not try to reconcile friends.*"

## **Political Controversy**

Prime Minister Gladstone, was Spurgeon's political hero and from the 1860's to the 1880's Spurgeon was an ardent political dissenter active on behalf on Gladstone's party. He denounced Disraeli (Gladstone's

opponent) in sermons and handed out handbills in support of Gladstone's party. However, when Mr Gladstone supported Home Rule in Ireland, Spurgeon withdrew his support. As Spurgeon declared: "*Home Rule means Rome rule.*" There could be no compromise with the papacy and Rome. The Martyrs who had been burned to death at Smithfield compelled him to resist.

### **Theological Controversy**

At about the same time that Gladstone's party split over Home Rule in Ireland, Spurgeon's opposition to liberalism split the Baptist Union. Many people had written to Spurgeon urging him to do something about the deteriorating situation in the Baptist Union with the spirit of modern Biblical criticism, liberalism undermining the authority of the Scriptures and denying the Deity of Christ. Spurgeon wrote articles in *The Sword and Trowel* defending the Puritan position and attacking the "*enemies of our Faith.*" Spurgeon criticised those who were "*giving up the atoning sacrifice, denying the inspiration of Holy Scripture and casting slurs upon Justification by Faith.*"

### **The Downgrade Controversy**

The "*Downgrade Controversy*", as it became known, pitted Baptist minister against Baptist minister and darkened Spurgeon's last years. The Baptist Union censured the most famous Baptist minister in the world. At the Baptist Union assembly 1888 a large majority voted a censure against Charles Spurgeon. Some observers considered that the Baptist Union had condemned "*the greatest, noblest and grandest leader of the Faith.*" However, Spurgeon rejected the suggestions that he form another denomination.

The Downgrade Controversy took its toll and Spurgeon's health continued to deteriorate. Spurgeon's actions strengthened the position of more conservative opinion in the Baptist Union. But in his last years he suffered from a sense of isolation and declared: "*Scarcely a Baptist minister of standing will know me.*" However, multitudes came to hear him preach.

### **Unsurpassed**

He never claimed to be a theologian. He was a Gospel preacher, and in that he unsurpassed in his day and since. Charles Spurgeon combined old-fashioned Biblical doctrine and up-to-date preaching methods. He had an uncanny ability to sense the pulse of his times, and he knew how to reach out to ordinary and troubled people in a way that they could understand and respond to. He spoke the language of the market place, humorously, with common sense and compelling power.

Spurgeon described his approach to preaching as "*I take my text and make a beeline to the Cross.*" He described saving Faith as "*an immediate relation to Christ, accepting, receiving, resting upon Him alone, for Justification, Sanctification, and eternal life by virtue of the Covenant of Grace.*" Spurgeon wrote: "*Our warfare is with men who are giving up the atoning sacrifice, denying the inspiration of Holy Scripture, and casting slurs on Justification by Faith.*"

When Spurgeon took a text, he took it seriously and he used it to point people to Christ.

Spurgeon's sermons came to be published in the Monday editions of the *London Times* and even the *New York Times*. Occasionally Spurgeon had to ask members of his congregation not to attend the next Sunday service, that newcomers might find a seat.

### **A Man of God**

Charles Spurgeon was a man of God, a man of prayer and a man of the Word. He studied diligently and read avidly. He broke with traditions and conventions, becoming the greatest communicator of his age. Devoted to the Scriptures, to disciplined prayer, and to godly living, Spurgeon exemplified Christian commitment when he stood in the pulpit. This gave power to his preaching.

### **The One Thing He Lacked**

The one thing that Spurgeon lacked was good health. He constantly suffered from ailments and fell into serious depression at times. Yet, he overcame physical limitations and relentless criticism to be

established at the greatest preacher in an age of great preachers. Once while laid low by illness he declared: *“It is a great trial to be unable to preach in the pulpit, but it is no small comfort to be able to preach through the press.”*

Spurgeon wrote: *“If ministers of the Gospel, instead of giving lectures, and devoting so much time to literary and political pursuits, would preach the Word of God, and preach it as if they were pleading for their own lives, ah, then, my brethren, we might expect better success.”*

### **Spurgeon’s Theology**

Spurgeon’s theology was radically Biblical. *“It has been my earnest endeavour ever since I’ve preached the Word, never to keep back a single doctrine which I have believed to be taught of God...if God teaches it, it is enough. If it is not in the Word, away with it!”*

It is well known that Charles Spurgeon was a Calvinist. He went against the contemporary trend of abandoning, and often denouncing, Calvinism. When the new Metropolitan Tabernacle was opened in 1861, his first series of sermons was on the Five Points of Calvinism.

### **Sanctification**

Charles Spurgeon taught a strong doctrine of sanctification, but he was quite scathing about perfectionism: *“Though they persuade themselves that their sins are dead, it is highly probably that the rest of their sins are only keeping out of the way to let their pride have room to develop to ruinous proportions.”*

### **The Puritan Hope**

As far as eschatology goes, Charles Spurgeon shared the Puritans’ Post-millennial eschatology of hope, that the Great Commission would be fulfilled before the return of Christ.

### **Mere Christianity**

When people asked him concerning his theology he responded that he would like to think of himself as a *“mere Christian”*, but then he would add *“I’m never ashamed to avow myself a Calvinist. I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist, but if I’m asked what my creed is, I reply, it is Jesus Christ!”*

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