



Charles Spurgeon

The Prince of Preachers

—by Peter Hammond

In an age of great preachers the greatest was Charles Haddon Spurgeon whose father and grandfather were independent congregational ministers. Charles was born in 1834 in Essex, an area with a long tradition of Protestant resistance to Catholicism. His earliest childhood memories were of listening to sermons and learning Hymns. Charles first read 'The Pilgrim's Progress' at age six and went on to read it over 100 times. He regarded 'Foxe's Book of Martyrs' as one of the most significant books he ever read.

imal, however he devoured his grandfather's Puritan books and was well read. In 1849, when Charles was 15 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 when a 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!

Charles Spurgeon broke with traditions and conventions, becoming the greatest communicator of his age and one of the most popular authors.

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.

A prophetic word

When Charles was only ten years old, a visiting missionary was struck by how young Charles read the Bible with such emphasis. His formal education was min-

You will never get out of it unless you look to Christ!."

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!"

Becoming a baptist

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 in the River Lark, May 1850. He vowed to spend his life "in the extension of Christ's cause, in whatsoever way He pleases."

Charles preached his first sermon at the age of 16 before a small congregation of farm labourers and their wives in a thatched chapel. 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 18 months his reputation had spread to London, and he was invited to preach at the historic New Park Street Chapel.

Ministry in 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. 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. This was followed with the Indian Mutiny of 1857 which provoked such a tremendous outpouring of grief and rage leading to a national day

Street Baptist Church the congregation had 232 members. By the end of his pastorate, 38 years later, the membership had increased to 5 311. 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, his ministry immediately attracted huge excitement and attention.

Innovative and inspiring

Spurgeon was described as a compelling, charismatic speaker "dramatic to his

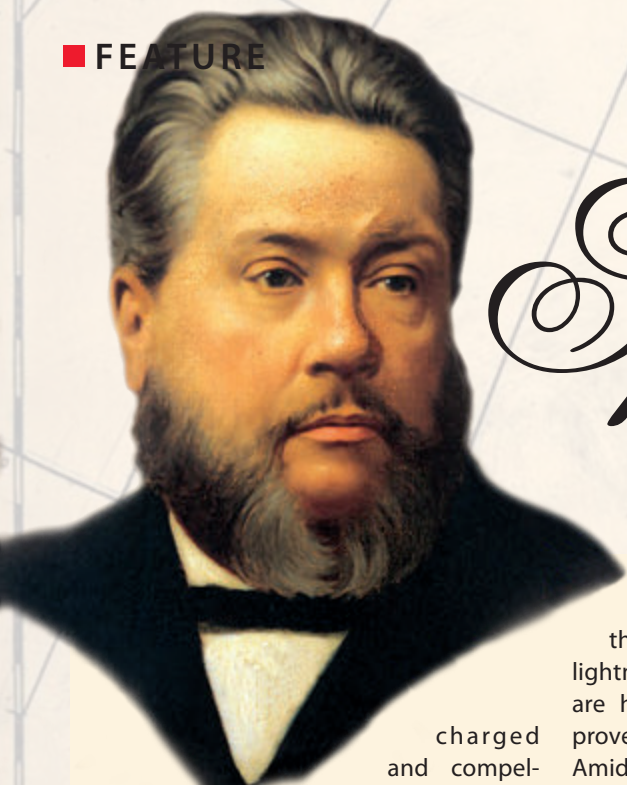
Though he suffered from ailments and depression at times, he overcame physical limitations and relentless criticism to be established as a great leader.

of fasting during which Charles was invited to address the largest audience of his life: almost 24 000 people gathered in the Crystal Palace.

Very conscious of his youth and inexperience he 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

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: Spurgeon's language was graphic, emotion-ally





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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

“...I may be called to stand where the thunderclouds brew, where the lightning’s play, and tempestuous winds are howling. 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...”

yet came away unharmed.” Spurgeon later said that the fire at Surrey Gardens was “sufficient to shatter my reason” and “silence my ministry forever.”

The Metropolitan Tabernacle

At Spurgeon’s request the new church 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 first mega church, seating over 5 000 people. Every person who joined his huge congregation was personally interviewed by Spurgeon who wanted to ensure that their conversion was genuine.

During his early years in London, Spurgeon received intense slander and scorn. 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. The theme for his Sunday morning sermon was usually not chosen until Saturday night, and the Sunday evening sermon

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condemned the young minister’s style and appearance. Many ministers were openly contemptuous of his “sensationalism”, although it was later pointed out that many of them came to copy him and even appropriate his sermons.

A powerful sermon

In October 1856, Spurgeon was to commence weekly services at the Royal Surrey Gardens Music Hall. That morning he preached on Malachi 3:10 “*Prove Me now...*” He declared:

Tragedy strikes

That evening Surrey Hall, designed to hold up to 12 000, was overflowing with 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 hospitalised from the stampede.

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



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.

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, and revised by him on Monday mornings. They were published every Thursday, translated into several languages, and sold as far afield as Australia and America. They were translated into more than 20 language and by 1917 over 100 million copies of Spurgeon’s sermons had been sold.

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. Today there is more material available written by Charles Spurgeon than by any other Christian author.

Charles Spurgeon drew to his services the prime minister William Gladstone, reformer Lord Shaftsbury, members of the Royal Family, Florence Nightingale and David Livingstone. Spurgeon often met with China Inland Mission founder Hudson Taylor and the famous founder of orphanages, George Müller. 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, 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.”

A pastor, founder and lecturer

Although Charles Spurgeon trained many pastors, he himself had received no theological training. He also 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 a Pastor’s College. He made himself responsible for a weekly lecture and published his notes in ‘Lectures to My Students’, which remains a major textbook in Baptist colleges to this day.»





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Nearly 900 students were trained at Spurgeon's

College during his lifetime. Spurgeon's College continues to this day. In 1866 a gift of £20 000 enabled him to found an orphanage providing a home and education for 500 homeless children. In the same year he formed an association to give country people the opportunity to buy Christian books and Bibles at low cost.

At the 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.

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 and liberalism undermining the authority of the Scriptures. Spurgeon wrote articles defending the Puritan position and attacking the "enemies of our faith."

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."

The greatest preacher

The controversy took its toll on Spurgeon's health and in his last years he suffered from a sense of isolation however, multitudes came to hear him preach. He never claimed to be a theologian. He was a Gospel preacher, and in that he was 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 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.

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