
Charles Simeon (1759-1836)

A Trainer of Ministers

Tim Grass

In our day it is rarely denied that an appropriate training is essential for those entering the Christian ministry, though there may be differences as to the interpretation of the word *appropriate*. Such an emphasis on the need for training has not always been the case, however; only in the last 150 years has such training been provided within the Church of England.¹ Previously, no theological degree courses existed, nor were there any other courses geared specifically to the training of men for the ministry.² The general method of preparation for those seeking ordination was to take a degree course at Oxford or Cambridge; a certificate proving attendance at a short course of lectures given by the Professor of Divinity was all that was required from ordinands at Cambridge. Virtually nothing else was available to those wishing to prepare themselves for their duties (although the Eclectic Society's discussions provided stimulation for Evangelicals already in the ministry). Indeed, many were unconcerned about such preparation, seeing ordination merely as the gateway to a respectable profession in which a man might make his way in the world as well as in any other.

Ministry to Students

Against this background Charles Simeon's concern to train men entering the ministry appears all the more striking, and his approach to doing so all the more revolutionary. His recognition of the need sprang from his own experience: he was converted in 1779, soon after arriving at King's College,³ but no other person was directly involved. After this, he spent three years without any Christian fellowship. This enforced isolation was only ended in 1782 when he was introduced to another student, John Venn, whose father Henry Venn had done much work at Huddersfield during a time of awakening there. Venn took Simeon home with him to Yelling, where his father now ministered, and Simeon found great refreshment in the company and counsel of this godly man; from then on he often rode out from Cambridge to spend a day at Yelling with the Venns. Of Henry Venn, Simeon later said: *In this aged minister I found a father, an instructor, and a most bright example...*⁴

Simeon's own ministry reproduced many of the features found in Venn's, summarised by Hennell⁵ as comprising ministry of the word, use of the prayer book, revival of sacraments, classes for the spiritually awakened, visitation of the poor, distribution of tracts, fellowship between clergy, and civic involvement. In due course this pattern appeared again and again in the ministries of those who had been trained by Simeon, as he sought to provide them with the guidance he had lacked at the start of his own ministry.

Simeon's own ministry was highly unusual in that it was spent in one parish Holy

Trinity Cambridge, where he ministered from 1782 to 1836. Even before this he had said, *How should I rejoice if God were to give me that church, that I might preach the gospel there, and be a herald for him in the midst of the university.*⁶

He refused to seek a move because he felt that he was reaching a strategic group of people - students.

...many of those who hear me are legions in themselves, because they are going forth to preach, or else to fill stations of influence in society. In that view I look upon my position here as the highest and most important in the kingdom, nor would I exchange it for any other.⁷

In addition, he was aware of the response that was coming from this group to his ministry: ... *it seems daily of more and more importance that I should avail myself of the disposition which there is in the young men to receive the Word.*⁸

By 1811 he was spending two-thirds of his time with his student hearers, and largely through his work Cambridge achieved the reputation of an evangelical centre. Even bishops were to consult him for an assessment of their ordination candidates. Because of his ministry, and also that of those whom he trained, Lord Macaulay could say in 1844:

As to Simeon, if you knew what his authority and influence were, and how they extended from Cambridge to the most remote corners of England, you would allow that his real sway in the church was far greater than that of any primate.⁹

There were a number of contributory factors to Simeon's influence, but the one on which I wish to focus is **his work among those preparing for the ministry.** This is a wider concept than that of structured training and is relevant to those in our own churches with gifts of ministry.

The Need for Training

Simeon's own lack of guidance as a young clergyman made him convinced that preparation was essential for those entering the ministry. Nothing was provided by the church authorities, nor by the University, and he had the field to himself. He was convinced of the necessity of a call to the ministry, which he saw as coming ...partly from a sense of obligation to him for his redeeming love, partly from a compassion for the ignorant and perishing multitudes around us, and partly from a desire to be an honoured instrument in the Redeemer's hands...¹⁰

But as well as this a man had to have the requisite gifts and these could be greatly improved by training.

The evangelical party within the Church of England had not always conducted themselves in an orderly manner towards the authorities, nor had they acted wisely within their own congregations; because of this, prejudice had arisen which could have been lessened by a more judicious approach. Simeon himself had early followed John Berridge's practice of preaching in other men's parishes but under Venn's influence had given this up and sought to observe the regulations laid down. Through his training he sought to influence younger ministers to do the same; by so doing, he probably helped to greatly reduce the numbers leaving the Church of England for one or other of the Nonconformist denominations.

Training for Preaching

Simeon's appointment to Holy Trinity was one which went against many of the rules; he was still only a Deacon and thus not yet able to celebrate Holy Communion, he had not served a curacy and thus could not be said to be experienced enough to take charge of one of Cambridge's leading churches so he got his father to write to the Bishop of Ely to put his name forward for the living! Not surprisingly, he experienced sustained opposition from many of the congregation; their own choice of minister (the previous curate) had been rejected by the Bishop, although he continued to hold the position of Lecturer for some years, conducting a service each Sunday afternoon. The church wardens pursued a policy of non-cooperation, refusing to unlock the pews for Simeon's services and removing the benches installed by Simeon for his congregation. Because of this opposition Simeon was unable to do much general visitation in the parish and therefore concentrated his energies on preaching.

The existing tradition of preaching favoured an artificiality of style and content; Simeon felt it important that a preacher speak from the heart. Exposition of the Scriptures as we know it was almost unknown, yet he was convinced that this should dictate his presentation and his content. There was no older minister at hand to advise him and so Simeon, with a characteristic determination to find a practical solution to this problem, set himself to discover how to preach. He took every opportunity of conducting services in other churches when invited to do so, repeating and refining his sermons so that the voice of Scripture might clearly be heard through them. Although poorly taught in Greek (which he blamed on his old school, Eton) he worked hard at exegesis of the text, often spending twelve hours or more on a single sermon. Through much hard work he arrived at the following rules:-

This is the great secret, (so to speak) of all composition for the pulpit. Every text, whether long or short, must be reduced to a categorical proposition; 1st, In order to preserve a perfect unity in the subject: and, 2ndly, in order to take it up, and prosecute it in an orderly manner...

THE RULES WHICH THE EDITOR WOULD GIVE FOR THE COMPOSITION OF A SERMON, ARE THESE.

1. Take for your subject that which you believe to be the mind of God in the passage before you...

2. Mark *the character* of the passage.

It may be more simple, as a declaration, a precept, a promise, a threatening, an invitation, an appeal; or more complex, as a cause, and effect; a principle, and a consequence; an action, and a motive to that action; and, whatever be *the character of the text*, (especially if it be clearly marked) *let that direct you in the arrangement of your discourse upon it...*

3. Mark *the spirit* of the passage...

...whatever it be, *let that be the spirit of your discourse...*¹¹

Simeon began to lecture to students in 1790, dealing with a range of topics which included composition, and in 1792 he came across a book which advocated an approach identical to his own; the book was AN ESSAY ON THE COMPOSITION OF A SERMON, by a seventeenth-century French Reformed pastor, Jean Claude. Translating and editing this work, Simeon began to use it as a set text for what

had now become his sermon classes, and eventually included it in his magnum opus, *HORAE HOMILETICAE* (of which more later).

Simeon's sermon classes were held in his rooms at King's College; since he never married, he was able to live there as a Fellow of the college all his life. On a Sunday evening (later a Friday) fifteen to twenty ordinands would attend and he described the procedure thus:

I have one evening for the study of Composition, making Claude my groundwork. I give the text for the elucidation of each distinct topic. They treat the text, and I make my remarks on their compositions, pointing out what I conceive to be the more perfect way.¹²

By explaining the text in its context, Simeon also intended that his hearers should gain a clearer view of evangelical truth, and many did.

As well as dealing with the structure of a sermon, Simeon treated such topics as elocution and delivery; he held the view that *It is the want of a good and impressive delivery that destroys the usefulness of a great proportion of pious ministers.*¹³ His own delivery at first appeared affected to many, but he later came to be acknowledged as a very powerful preacher; there is extant a series of silhouettes by Edouart depicting him in various characteristic pulpit poses.

Horae Homileticae

Simeon produced several editions of his sermon outlines, the final one of twenty-one volumes appearing under this title in 1833. This vast work included 2,536 sermon outlines, taken from every book of Scripture. These 'skeletons' were intended to be used as frameworks on which ministers could base their own sermons. It was Simeon's hope that they would tend

1. To raise the tone of preaching throughout the land
2. To promote a candid, liberal, and consistent mode of explaining the Scriptures.
3. To weaken at least, if not eradicate, the disputes about Calvinism and Arminianism; and thus to recommend, to the utmost of my power, the unhampered liberality of the Church of England.

and that their effect would be

1. To impart to young Ministers a clear view of the gospel.
2. To help them to an inward experience of it in their own souls.¹⁴

As always, Simeon's interest was in the practical relevance of Scripture; for him Scripture was not to be viewed as a system but rather as a remedy, and his exegetical practice was rooted in the needs of his congregation. He encouraged his students to take the same view: *Young ministers should inquire, not what can I teach my people, but what they can receive. Jesus did not tell his disciples that which they could not bear, but spoke to them as they were able to bear it.*¹⁵

"Being no one's convert, Charles Simeon became no one's follower"¹⁶, and this was true of his approach to the text of Scripture; he rarely quoted other writers, wishing rather to let the text speak for itself. He disapproved of trying to make the text of Scripture fit into a rigid doctrinal system, and had some strong words to say about this practice in an earlier edition of his sermons:

Many have carried their attachment to system so far, that they could not endure to preach upon any passage of Scripture that seemed to oppose their favourite

sentiments; or, if they did, their whole endeavour has been to make the text speak a different language from that which it appeared to do. In opposition to all such modes of procedure, it is the Author's wish in this preface to recommend a conformity to the Scriptures themselves without any solicitude about systems of man's invention. Nor would anything under heaven be more grateful to him than to see names and parties buried in eternal oblivion, and primitive simplicity restored to the Church.¹⁷

Conversation Parties

As well as his sermon classes, Simeon held a *conversation party* each Friday evening, such a custom being fashionable at that time. He described the occasion to a minister in Oxford considering something similar:

My own habit is this: I have an open day, when all who choose it come to take their tea with me. Every one is at liberty to ask what questions he will, and I give to them the best answer I can. Hence a great variety of subjects come under review - subjects which we could not discuss in the pulpit - and the young men find it a very edifying season. We have neither exposition, as such, nor prayer; but I have opportunity of saying all that my heart can wish, without the formality of a set ordinance...¹⁸

Between forty and sixty students would attend, mostly ordinands, and his fatherly concern for them did much to win their love and respect. He dealt with a great variety of subjects, covering such areas as personal religion, exegesis of difficult passages, ministerial duties and diligence in study. Simeon disapproved of neglecting academic studies for spiritual work; students were at University to study, and they must do so to the best of their ability. At a time when students were on occasion penalised in examinations for 'notorious and obstinate Simeonism' his policy must have done much to remove prejudice against him and his message; it is also worth noting that many of Simeon's students achieved academic distinction.

One of Simeon's students (and later his curate for twelve years), Thomas Thomason, expressed his appreciation of Simeon's instruction in a letter home:

Mr Simeon watches over us as a shepherd over his sheep. He takes delight in instructing us - and has us continually at his rooms. He has nothing to do with us as it respects our situation at college. His Christian love and zeal prompt him to notice us.¹⁹

Simeon's Curates

A succession of brilliant men served as curates at Holy Trinity, many of whom went on to do excellent work in their own right as ministers and missionaries. At the time a curate was very often appointed to stand in for a vicar who held several livings at once and lived elsewhere; to the curate would be delegated virtually all the work (but hardly any of the income!). Simeon's approach was far removed from this; he sought to train his curates, and treated them as his friends and his equals: '*Not my curate, my brother*'. He viewed them as working with him rather than for him, and greatly valued the assistance they were able to provide as his workload increased. To provide increased opportunities for preaching the gospel he took responsibility for the parish of Stapleford, just outside Cambridge; as well

as this, he would often take services elsewhere on a Sunday afternoon while his curate took Evening Prayer at Holy Trinity. When in 1808 Simeon's health broke down (and he did not fully recover for a number of years) he rejoiced that in his absence Thomas Thomason was not only coping with up to five services each Sunday but seeing God's blessing on his work.

One reason why Simeon was able to accomplish so much in his life was that he possessed the ability to delegate; writing of the societies which he had set up to provide pastoral and practical care within the parish, he said:

By these, I hope, great good has been done; whilst by their supplying my lack of service, I have been left at liberty to follow that line of duty which was more appropriate to my own powers, and which I could not have prosecuted, if I had not thus contrived to save my time...²⁰

Such delegation he practised with his curates, although at times they must have found it frustrating. In spite of his belief that they worked *with* rather than *for* him, what he tended to delegate to them was the ceaseless round of baptisms, weddings and funerals!

Simeon set high standards in his own ministry, and expected his curates to live up to them; when they failed to do so, he was not slow to point out their faults - a practice which the introspective Henry Martyn found reduced him almost to despair. However, many men expressed their debt to Simeon for the time spent as his curates. A number of them went overseas, for Simeon was ever on the lookout for potential missionaries and was himself instrumental in the foundation of the Church Missionary Society in 1799.

Letter Writing

It is only natural that Simeon should have kept in touch with his former students and curates by letter, but even when we allow that his was an age in which letter-writing was often the only means of communication, it is amazing how many letters he actually wrote. On his death in 1836, his sideboard was found to contain copies (mostly made by hand) of *over nine thousand* letters, often several pages in length. He did not consider himself a great religious letter-writer, however:

As for sitting down to write a religious letter, it is what I cannot do myself, and what I do not very much admire, unless there be some particular occasion that calls for it. I love rather that a letter be a free and easy communication of such things as are upon the mind, and such as we imagine will interest the person with whom we correspond. Some indeed, who have a talent for letter writing, may employ their pen profitably in the more direct and formal way; but it is a thing I cannot do; religion with me is only the salt with which I season the different subjects on which I write; and it is recommended in that view by St Paul, to be used in the whole of our converse with each other.²¹

In spite of his own words, his letters were full of wise counsel to ministers pointing out their mistakes or encouraging them to persevere in the face of opposition; he had a shrewd understanding of the factors which sometimes make for friction between minister and people:

The difference between young and old Ministers in general, consists in this; that the statements of the former are crude and unqualified, whilst those of the

latter have such limitations and distinctions, as the Scriptures authorise and the subjects require.²²

This wisdom led him to recognise the interplay between mind, body and spirit, and to avoid a super-spiritual approach to situations; he often warned his friends to mind their health, and to recognise the need for rest. His understanding of practical matters meant that a letter from him might well be accompanied by a generous gift to someone in need, or a well-chosen book. In 1787 we find him writing to David Brown, whose SELF-INTERPRETING BIBLE was his own constant companion from 1785 on, to ask if he could purchase forty copies of this work (for giving away to needy clergy) at the full booksellers' discount.²³

An Assessment

Clearly, Charles Simeon's ministry was extremely influential in many ways (and we have only looked at one area of it); even today, on the anniversary of his death (November 13th), a prayer is said in the chapel of his old college, King's:

Almighty and everlasting God, who by thy holy servant, Charles Simeon, didst mould the lives of many that they might go forth and teach others also; mercifully grant that as through evil report and good report he ceased not to preach thy saving Word, so we may never be ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord, who with Thee and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth one God world without end.²⁴

From the factors which made Simeon so effective in preparing men for the ministry we now highlight those which challenge and are relevant to us today. They comprise the three elements in his own admiration for Henry Venn.

a father... Simeon strikes us as a man who was prepared to open up and share himself with his students, without falling into exhibitionism. His zeal for their progress was such that he earned the nickname of *The Old Apostle*. His work in training students for the ministry was accompanied by a deep and prayerful concern for them, which continued after they had gone on to work elsewhere. He possessed to a marked degree the ability to 'empathize' with them in times of trouble, and because of his fatherly care earned the right to speak the truth in love to his former students where necessary.

an instructor... Simeon was almost the first man in the history of the English pulpit since the Middle Ages to appreciate that it is perfectly possible to teach men how to preach, and to discover how to do so...²⁵ His ability to look at a problem and find a practical solution to it led him to provide what is now recognised as indispensable for fully effective ministry. The instruction he gave was not merely theoretical but was backed up by his own example as a preacher and by the work he set for his sermon classes week by week. He described the qualifications necessary for a useful preacher as: *...extensive knowledge, deep acquaintance with the heart, a clear, strong voice, a commanding manner, a tender and affectionate spirit, an ardent love to souls, and a most unfeigned desire to approve himself to God...*²⁶ He was concerned for the development of the whole man, even to the extent of emphasising the necessity of physical exercise in what strikes us as rather a quaint

manner:

I always say to my young friends, 'Your success in the Senate House depends much on the care you take of the three-mile stone out of Cambridge. If you go everyday and see that nobody has taken it away, and go quite round to watch lest anyone has damaged its farthest side, you will be best able to read steadily all the time you are at Cambridge. If you neglect it, woe betide your degree. Yes, - Exercise, constant and regular and ample, is absolutely essential to a reading man's success.'²⁷

Simeon's genius for problem-solving led him to innovate, and to vitalize some of the practices current in his day, such as the letter and the conversation party. We may not adopt the same methods today, but we can surely make use of the opportunities presented to us by our culture.

What is most impressive about Simeon's work as an instructor is the priority which he gave it; in spite of the size of his parish, and the many outside activities in which he was involved, he spent a large part of his time in training future leaders. He saw very clearly that in so doing he was multiplying the fruit that would result from his labours, and that such work was to be seen as an investment in terms of time, money, and personal concern. In this he was following the example of Jesus Christ with the twelve disciples, and setting us a thought-provoking precedent.

...and a most bright example. Already we have seen the power of Simeon's example; through his influence many younger evangelicals were persuaded to remain in the Church of England and to exercise wisdom and discretion in their ministries; in so doing they overcame much of the prejudice that initially existed against evangelicalism. Simeon's own consistency of character and conduct did much to disarm his opponents in Cambridge, and it was seen to flow from his total commitment to one thing, as the memorial tablet in Holy Trinity church makes plain:

In Memory of
THE REV. CHARLES SIMEON, M.A.,
SENIOR FELLOW OF KING'S COLLEGE,
AND FIFTY-FOUR YEARS VICAR OF THIS PARISH; WHO,
WHETHER AS THE GROUND OF HIS OWN HOPES,
OR AS
THE SUBJECT OF ALL HIS MINISTRATIONS.
DETERMINED
TO KNOW NOTHING BUT
JESUS CHRIST AND HIM CRUCIFIED.
1 COR.II.2

References

- 1 Chichester was the first theological college to be founded within the Church of England, in 1838.
- 2 It does not seem that the dissenters provided much training specifically for ministers, though their colleges did provide a more useful all-round education.
- 3 Full accounts may be found in the biographies by Handley Moule and Hugh Evan Hopkins.
- 4 H Evan Hopkins, CHARLES SIMEON OF CAMBRIDGE (Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), p 34
- 5 In Arthur Pollard & Michael Hennell, CHARLES SIMEON 1759-1836 (SPCK, 1964) ch 6
- 6 Hopkins, p 36
- 7 Pollard & Hennell, p 140 (taken from Abner W Brown, RECOLLECTIONS OF THE CONVERSATION PARTIES OF THE REV. CHARLES SIMEON, p 176; (unfortunately I could not locate a copy of this book for myself)
- 8 In a letter to Rev T Thomason dated Aug 8th, 1817 (Included in Wm Carus, MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE OF THE REV. CHARLES SIMEON, M.A, Hatchard & Son, 3rd ed 1848)
- 9 Hopkins, p 118 (taken from G O Trevelyan THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF LORD MACAULAY (1876) I, p 68 n
- 10 Pollard & Hennell p 148 (taken from Brown, p 208)
- 11 Carus p 450 (taken from Simeon's "collected works" - presumably HORAE HOMILETICAE)
- 12 In a letter of Dec 9th, 1829 (Carus, p 449f)
- 13 Carus, p 482
- 14 In a memorandum of May 24th, 1833 (Carus, p 506)
- 15 Hopkins, p 133
- 16 *ibid*, p 173
- 17 Carus, p 138
- 18 *ibid*, p 449 Detailed accounts of Simeon's conversation parties held in 1833 are reproduced in Carus, pp 452-8 and Moule, pp 135-44
- 19 J Sargent, LIFE OF THE REV. T. T. THOMASON M.A. (Seeley & Burnside, 1834), p 40
- 20 In a letter to the Bishop of Winchester, dated Dec 11th, 1829 (Carus, p 447)
- 21 Moule, p 192
- 22 Carus, p 408
- 23 Carus, p 55f
- 24 Hopkins, p 221
- 25 C H E Smyth, THE ART OF PREACHING, p 175 (quoted by Pollard & Hennell, p 3)
- 26 From his diary for Mar 29th, 1807 (Carus, p 154)
- 27 Hopkins, p 92