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# Spurgeon and the Gospel Call

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Many of the canonical prophets under the old covenant had a definite experience of the Lord which had a great bearing upon the emphasis of their respective ministries. For example, the holiness of God was a keynote within the prophetic message of Isaiah and surely this was a result of what he had witnessed in the year King Uzziah died.

The influence of great men in the church age displays the same basic principle. Luther's search for peace with God led him to a re-discovery of the doctrine of justification by faith and this in turn became a means of blessing to the world.

C H Spurgeon, provides another example of how an initial experience of the grace of God led to a clearly defined emphasis throughout his years of ministry in Victorian London.

## **Doctrinal Position**

Until the day he died, Spurgeon was a self-confessed adherent to a doctrinal stance which could be traced back to the days when East Anglia was dominated by the influence of Puritanism. From his earliest days as the pastor of the Baptist Church at Waterbeach, he preached that God is sovereign in the salvation of mankind and his personal commitment to a Reformed/Calvinistic soteriology was to remain clear and unequivocal.

Anyone who seriously studies the sermons or the auto-biographical material of Spurgeon, will search in vain for anything which would indicate that our salvation is achieved other than by a divine initiative and through divine power.

Preaching at the Metropolitan Tabernacle (On behalf of the Free Hospitals in London) on June 13th 1880, Spurgeon said:

The old proverb hath it, "Nothing is freer than a gift." Every blessing we receive from God comes as a gift. We have purchased nothing. Comfort in Christ is an absolutely free, spontaneous gift of sovereign grace, given not on account of anything we have done, or ever shall do, but because the LORD has a right to do as he wills with his own; therefore doth he select unto himself a people to whom this free gift of consolation can be given.

Spurgeon also emphasised his understanding of God's sovereignty in salvation in an illuminating section of his auto-biography:

I can put the crown nowhere but upon the head of Him whose mighty grace saved me from going down into the pit. Looking back on my life, I can see that the dawning of it all was of God; of God effectively. I took no torch with which to light the sun, but the sun enlightened me. I did not commence my spiritual life, no I rather kicked, and struggled against the things of the Spirit: when He drew me, for a time I did not run after Him: there was a natural hatred in my soul of everything holy and good. But, sure I am, I can say now, speaking on behalf of myself, "He only is my salvation"

Spurgeon was bold in his denunciation of any view of personal salvation which appeared to militate against the free and unconditional grace of God toward the sinner. Consequently, he opposed those who tended to teach that divine power was somehow subordinate to a human response in the matter of personal faith. In all fairness, it ought to

be stated that his opposition to other views was a matter of principle rather than pride. Essentially, he was convinced that God was seen to be glorified in a salvation which comes to man by grace and through faith alone.

## **The Gospel Call**

Having established the theology which formed the basis of C H Spurgeon's preaching it is important to stress that he was equally convinced of the need to offer the gospel call to the unconverted.

The frequency of his own gospel calls and the language which he employed can often be overlooked by people who would espouse the same basic theological position. How often do we hear preaching today which is truly *pathetic* and urgent in its appeal for sinners to repent and believe the gospel? Spurgeon's own preaching was well-structured, intellectually stimulating and certainly well illustrated. However, first and foremost his ministry had a hold upon people because it was warm and appealing and because he never failed to offer the hope of mercy to sinful man.

There can surely be no doubt that Spurgeon's own conversion experience had a lasting impact upon the development of his own preaching. It is described for us in these memorable words:

While under concern of soul, I resolved that I would attend all the places of worship in the town where I lived, in order that I might find out the way of salvation. I was willing to do anything, and to be anything, if God would only forgive my sin. I set off, determined to go round all the chapels, and did go to every place of worship; but for a long time I went in vain. I do not however blame the ministers. One man preached divine sovereignty; I could hear him with pleasure, but what was that sublime truth to a poor sinner who wished to know what he must do to be saved? There was another admirable man who always preached about the law but what was the use of ploughing up ground that needed to be sown? Another was a practical preacher. I heard him, but it was very much like a commanding officer teaching the manoeuvres of war to a set of men with no feet. What could I do? All his exhortations were lost on me. I knew that it was said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved," but I did not know what it meant to believe on Christ. These good men all preached truths suited to their many congregations who were spiritually-minded people, but what I wanted to know was, "How can I get my sins forgiven?" - they never told me that. I desired to hear how a poor sinner, under a sense of sin, might find peace with God and when I went, I heard a sermon on, "Be not deceived God is not mocked," which cut me up still worse, but did not bring me to rest. I was like a dog under the table, not allowed to eat of the children's food.

He then describes just how he was brought to peace with God through the simple presentation of the gospel on a snowy January morning in 1850:

The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed up, I suppose. At last, a very thin looking man, a shoemaker or a tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say. The text was:

Look unto me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth.

When he had managed to spin out ten minutes or so he was at the end of his tether. . . Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said "Young man you look very miserable, and you will always be miserable if you don't obey my text; but if you

obey now, this moment, you will be saved ”. I saw at once the way of salvation. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people looked and were healed, so it was with me. Between half-past ten o’clock when I entered that chapel, and half-past twelve o’clock when I was at home again, what a change had taken place in me! I had passed from darkness into marvellous light, from death to life.

Several important factors need to be highlighted in connection with this personal account of Spurgeon’s own conversion experience.

Firstly, this was a young man who had been brought up in a home which was thoroughly alive to evangelical concerns. During the course of his childhood, Spurgeon had received a grounding in the truths of Holy Scripture which had provided him with a knowledge of God. Although he did not experience the effect of saving grace until the moment of his conversion he was more than familiar with the power of grace in the lives of his own family.

However, his reference to the time it took for him to pass from darkness into marvellous light is significant in that it was to have a tremendous impact upon his subsequent career as a great soul-winner. There is every indication that Spurgeon preached the gospel in such a manner that anyone who listened to him might have expected that God could effectively do the same for them.

Two excerpts from his later preaching at the Metropolitan Tabernacle will show what impact his own conversion had on his presentation of the gospel call:

When a man is converted it is done at once. There may be a long process by which he comes to it, and there may be a long succession of light-breakings before he gets clear about it; but there is a turning point. There is a line, as thin as a razor’s edge, which divides death from life, a point of decision which separates the saved from the lost. It must be done at once. And possibly it is now or never, - ere the clock tick again. Wilt thou have Christ and go to heaven, or thy sins and go to hell? Quick! Sharp! God help thee to answer aright, for on that answer may hang eternal things. I believe it was always so. Men decide at once or not at all. It was so with me. I was thinking, as I stood up here to preach, that this is just the weather in which I found the Saviour. Some did not come out that morning, it snowed so hard; but I had a heavy heart, and I wanted to lighten it; and I went to the place of worship, and when I heard the gospel, and he that preached it said to me, Look! Look, young man! Look, now! I did there and then look to Jesus. When the word came to me, immediately I received it. There is one heavy knock sometimes at a man’s door, and he must open then, or no other knock may come. I think someone has come in here tonight that in God’s Name I may give that knock at his heart; and if the door be opened and he says, “Come in, blessed Saviour”, then all will be well.

Today is a time of obligation. Every man is under a present necessity as a subject of God to obey his Lord today, and having rebelled against his God, every sinner is under law to repent of his sin today . . . This day creating work began, why should not the new creation begin in you this good hour? Today the *fiat* of the Lord went forth, and there was light. O for that *fiat* to be heard within your souls that they might live! These are days which kings and prophets waited for, and saw not - blessed days, when mercy keeps an open house for all hungry souls, and when whosoever will may come, and him that cometh will in no wise be cast out. You cannot have a better time for coming to Christ than the season prescribed in the text - namely today.

These references make it abundantly clear that Spurgeon expected that God could work immediately upon the lives of his hearers. There was no attempt on his part to educate people in order to receive the gospel nor did he offer a veiled call to faith and repentance. The Prince of Preachers made the general call to unconverted people in a plain, direct and arresting fashion.

In the second place, Spurgeon's own conversion experience had led him to a serious evaluation of gospel preaching. Great emphasis is placed, in the personal account of his own salvation, on the need to find a ministry which would have answered his desire to find peace with God. Although he did not denigrate preaching which centred on the sovereignty of God, the place of the law or practical Christian living - he never lost sight of the need to make the way of faith clear to the outsider.

In addition to this, it would be perfectly correct to say that the gospel calls offered by Spurgeon were directed at the *lost* sinner rather than the *elect* sinner. The sermons bear their own testimony to the fact that he did not allow the Reformed/Calvinistic *ordo salutis* to tie him up in knots when it came to presenting the claims of Christ to unconverted people.

If we were not so certain of his basic theological position, some of the appeals contained in the preaching of Spurgeon might lead us to question seriously his commitment to the great Reformation doctrines. However, the following words were addressed to people by one of the strongest defendants of the Reformation heritage and by a staunch advocate of the free grace of God:

Is not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ able to forgive sin? We joyfully sing - Who is a pardoning God like thee, or who hath grace so rich and free? And you say that he cannot forgive you, and this in the teeth of many promises of mercy. He says all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men. Come now let us reason together, says the Lord, though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow though they be like crimson, they shall be as wool. You say that this is not true. Thus you frustrate the grace of God, and you make out that Christ died in vain, at least for you, for you say he cannot cleanse you. Oh, say not so: let not thine unbelief give the lie to God. Oh, believe that he is able to save even thee, and freely, at this very moment, to put all thy sin away, and to accept thee in Christ. Take heed of despondency, for if thou dost not trust him thou will make void his grace.

Ah, friends, if Jesus were here this morning, he might weep over some of you and say - Oh, that thou hadst known, even thou. You were a lovely child! Even in your earliest days you were fond of everything good and gracious; you were taken to a place of worship, and sat on you mother's knee, pleased to be there. You grew up to be a lad right full of promise, and all felt sure that you would be a Christian. What exhortations your father, who is now in heaven gave you! And she that bare you and loved you until she passed away, how she prayed and pleaded for you! You have come right up to the border land but you have not crossed over the line. You are not far from the kingdom of God, but you lack one thing - the one essential point of decision for Christ. Today is God's accepted time; postpone no longer the hour of decision. Alas that thou should perish! Shall the son of such a father be driven down to hell? I cannot bear it. God have mercy on you, sons and daughters of Christian parents. You have been enriched with Christian privileges why will ye die? Young man, so promising but yet so undecided, it makes the Saviour himself weep that thou, even thou, shouldst still refuse to know the things that make for peace.

In the light of these examples of the general call from Spurgeon's sermons, it is necessary to set these appeals within the context of his approach to preaching and his pronounced emphasis on the **unconditional grace of God**.

Firstly, the call to the unconverted in Spurgeon's preaching was never made in isolation from the exposition of the text of Holy Scripture. He was not an evangelist who simply gave a testimony or told stories and then pegged on an appeal at the end for people to be saved. The rule was, that he would take a verse or two from the Bible, refer to the context in which they were to be found and then draw several lines of relevant application to his hearers. Thus, his gospel calls were always developed in a manner which was consistent with the revealed Word of God. Clearly, this procedure would have helped to prevent the danger of being unbalanced or manipulative in his appeals to the unconverted.

Secondly, although Spurgeon preached for a decision it is quite clear that he knew that salvation was a change of heart which could only be achieved by the power of the Spirit in the life of a sinner. Whenever he pursued anyone with the aim of pressing home the claims of Christ to unbelievers there was generally some recognition of his dependency upon the determinate will of God. An example of this can be found at the end of an introduction to a sermon based on Jeremiah 8:20:

I earnestly pray the Lord to bless the words I am about to speak, that they may be rendered useful to many undecided persons to lead them to decision, and induce them to give themselves up to Christ at once. May the Holy Spirit work this blessed work in thousands. I have so long been silent that I am hungering to speak with power. Come, Holy Spirit! Come!

Furthermore, Spurgeon would have accepted the vital distinction between the *general call* and the *effectual call* of the gospel. Although he used every persuasion to appeal that the unconverted should be brought to faith, he knew that behind the preacher's voice the Holy Spirit must call. Reference to his autobiography gives us a very definite indication of his thinking on this matter:

The general call of the gospel is like sheet lightning we sometimes see on a summer's evening - beautiful, grand - but whoever heard of something being struck by it? But the special call of the gospel is the fork flashed from heaven; it strikes somewhere.

Thirdly, there is little evidence to suggest that Spurgeon ever used his great skill as an orator to seek for an immediate public demonstration of an inward change. Time and again in his sermons you will meet with a story of someone who had trusted in the Lord as the result of his ministry. However, in the normal run of things these people had often come to faith privately and then had spoken to him afterwards about the goodness of God. Spurgeon's advice to the seeker was that they should go home or get alone and do business with the Lord:

Some of you seekers have hitherto thought the door of mercy to be bolted against you. See, it stands wide open. Come and welcome. If any softness of feeling is stealing over you, let it work while you gladly yield. Do not talk nonsense on the way home, and so lose the effect of the discourse. Hasten to your chambers, fall on your knees, and rise not till you have accepted Jesus as your own Saviour. If you do so salvation will have come to your house this day, and God will be glorified. Amen.

## Conclusions

### 1. We should offer the gospel to all the lost

It has been established that Spurgeon drew a distinction between the general and the effectual call of the gospel. However, it is surely appropriate to ask whether or not our modern-day evangelistic preaching has failed to make a proper assessment of the relationship between these two calls. Are we in danger of failing the unbelievers who attend our places of worship because in the offer of the gospel we have neglected to preach the gospel to the *lost* sinner?

The apostle Paul once wrote, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. This, I would suggest, was the basis upon which Spurgeon appealed, with his utmost art and ability, for the immediate salvation of his hearers. He reckoned with the fact that God had promised to save mankind through the simple and unadorned medium of preaching. It was not within the power of the preacher to know who would be saved or lost, so it was imperative that he should use every promise and argument in Holy Scripture in appealing to men.

During his exposition of Romans 8:28-30, Dr D M Lloyd-Jones made an interesting aside which stands as a perfect commentary upon the position which was adopted by Spurgeon in his gospel preaching. I quote:

Our first duty to the unbeliever is to make him face himself. We are to be the attackers, and therefore direct these people to face themselves and their lives and their need of the Lord Jesus Christ. Men are not saved by believing the doctrine of election, or by believing in predestination. This is so important that I must adduce some authorities who confirm what I have been saying. Octavius Winslow believed these great doctrines of salvation; but when he deals with the question of how to handle the unbeliever, whether in preaching or discussion he says, "It is not essential to your salvation that you believe in election, but it is essential that you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ . . . You are to feel that you are a lost sinner, not that you are an elect sinner."

Of course, the Metropolitan Tabernacle was a hive of evangelistic activity and Spurgeon could preach to lost sinners in the certain knowledge that many of them attended his ministry. It has to be said that this fact would have provided him with a great incentive to preach the offer of the gospel so powerfully. Perhaps this type of preaching would be more prevalent in our own day if our churches were more active in bringing the unconverted under the sound of the gospel. However, where the opportunity prevails we can surely learn some vital lessons from one who was blessed so mightily in his evangelistic efforts.

### 2. We should aim directly at their hearts

It is clear that for Spurgeon the work of preaching the gospel would count for eternity in the lives of his hearers. His entire demeanour in the pulpit could be described as a *sanctified aggression* against the world, the flesh and the devil. The preaching heard at the famed Metropolitan Tabernacle was not merely an exhibition of doctrinal purity, blended together with exegetical exactness. Spurgeon took a direct aim at the hearts and lives of his congregation, he was a fisher of men who would not be happy with anything less than a catch.

If the unconverted before him were lying in the undergrowth of their own self-righteousness, he felt honour bound to chase them into the open field to meet with the Saviour.

If the unconverted before him entertained a hard view of God or themselves, he would aim to melt this opposition by emphasising the unselfish love of Christ.

If the unconverted before him had not yielded to the sanctifying influence, the church, Christian family or friends, he would press them not to neglect the goodness of God.

In countless other ways, he would appeal that the unconverted should seek the Lord whilst he may be found and all the energy of his pulpit exercises were applied to this great task.

### 3. We should labour to capture their attention

To preach without an object or an aim would have been regarded as an anathema as far as Spurgeon was concerned. Furthermore, the handling of divine and glorious gospel truth in a dull and laborious manner he would have regarded as being unthinkable.

Preaching at the Metropolitan Tabernacle on 1 Samuel 9:27 he made these telling remarks toward the close of his introduction:

I wish I could so speak that men would say of my preaching what they said of Whitefield's. One man said, "Whenever I went to church before, I calculated how many looms the church would hold - for he was a weaver - but when I heard Whitefield I never thought of a loom." Another said, "While I have been in church I have often built a ship from stem to stern; but when I heard Mr Whitefield I could not lay a plank; he took my mind right away from such things, and occupied me with higher thoughts." I pray you, help me in my endeavour to engross your attention. Let the ships go, and the loom go, and the kitchen go, and the business . . . and be alone now with yourself and God.

Spurgeon was a great preacher. Is there a temptation, however, to overlook the validity of his approach to gospel preaching simply because we do not possess his unique and amazing talent? Furthermore, accepting that God is sovereign, what was the real appeal of Spurgeon's preaching: did it rest in the *words* of the man or in his *tremendous heart* for the salvation of mankind?

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*Among the important elements in the promotion of conversion are your own tone, temper, and spirit in preaching. If you preach the truth in a dull, monotonous style, God may bless it, but in all probability he will not; at any rate the tendency of such a style is not to promote attention, but to hinder it. It is not often that sinners are awakened by ministers who are themselves asleep. A hard, unfeeling mode of speech is also to be avoided; want of tenderness is a sad lack, and repels rather than attracts. The spirit of Elijah may startle, and where it is exceedingly intense it may go far to prepare for the reception of the gospel; but for actual conversion more of John is needed, - love is the winning force. We must love men to Jesus. Great hearts are the main qualifications for great preachers, and we must cultivate our affections to that end.*

*C H Spurgeon, 'On conversion as our aim'  
Lectures, Second Series, 1877, p 188*

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