

# The Spurgeon Centenary.

## II. The Preacher.

ONE thing remains after all the controversy concerning C. H. Spurgeon has died down, namely that he was a power as a preacher. If he be tested by the ability to attract an audience, to hold it over a long period, to impress on men his particular outlook, to win conversions, then he stands the test easily. Moreover, if now, after the years, his printed sermons be examined, his power as a preacher is readily granted. They reveal qualities that make for power, and such qualities in an unusually high degree of development.

It is not necessary to speak here of his physical endowments, not the least of which was his remarkable voice. Those who had the pleasure of hearing him need no assurance that he could preach, and naturally they find the very statement of it somewhat gratuitous and irritating. But by the younger generation Spurgeon, like all others, is judged apart from the tradition. He takes his place in history and is looked at with the objectivity that history demands. Even then he stands the test. History grants him a very high place amongst the preachers of the Word.

This does not mean that he had no limitations as a preacher or that his limitations are overlooked. But it does mean, that while his limitations are admitted, yet his essentially great qualities are rightly appraised and appreciated.

To see him correctly it is necessary to see him in his setting.

Though he began outside the Baptist fold, yet more than most he incorporated one side of the Baptist tradition. The Baptists have produced four outstanding preachers—John Bunyan, Robert Hall, Alexander Maclaren and Charles Haddon Spurgeon. And in the denomination there have been two streams of tradition so far as concerns preaching. The one is represented by Robert Hall and Maclaren, the other pre-eminently by C. H. Spurgeon, who goes back to Bunyan.

For an understanding of this second stream of tradition it is necessary to recall the Puritanism out of which the English Baptists sprang. The Puritan outlook emphasised the Word of God as the revelation of the plan of Salvation and it regarded the proclamation or the preaching of the Word as the divine

appointment for the salvation of men. "It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believed." But preaching to the Puritans was somewhat different from what we mean by it to-day. It was nothing more or less than a steady persistent exposition of the Calvinistic system of doctrine on the basis of the Scriptures, in the conviction that the exposition would lead to salvation. A good deal that the modern preacher puts into his sermon the Puritans would have regarded as irrelevant, and much that there is even in Spurgeon's sermons would have scandalised them. Always in the Puritans it is a serious exposition of some one aspect of the great theme, with rarely an illustration from life and scarcely anything outside the covers of the Book. There are no ornaments of rhetoric, no attempts at literary conceits. From our point of view their sermons are as dry as dust. But that in their day was their merit. Earnestness, a rigid adherence to the one great purpose, a steady fidelity to the Word—such was their ideal. Their sermons were as sombre as their clothing and as correct.

Now the peculiar position of the Baptists led them to keep close to the Word of God, even more so than some others of the Puritans. It gave them a certain independence in their interpretation of the Word on baptism and church government, but beyond that they did not go. Illogically, they claimed the right of independent interpretation in these matters, but in theology they accepted the Calvinistic scheme and strenuously opposed the more liberal attitude, say, of the Quakers. Neither then nor later did the Baptists preach too much Baptist Doctrine. The substance of their sermons is the scheme of salvation. Nor were they particularly controversial. Their aim was to make men Christian. It is a striking fact that even Bunyan's allegory has been used by every body of Christians, even including the Roman Catholics (though they of necessity had to eliminate certain references to the Pope). But in its substance the book is not sectarian but Christian. And that statement is true of probably eighty per cent. of the tremendous output of Spurgeon. The chief notes that characterise this early preaching of the Baptists are this positive emphasis, the exposition of Calvinism and the activity of laymen.

With Bunyan there came into this Puritan tradition a new note. He was a great evangelistic preacher drawing his thousands to hear him, and of course he also was rooted in the Calvinistic theology. But is it possible to maintain that the writer of the *Pilgrim's Progress* could be content with a mere exposition of the Calvinistic scheme? Unfortunately we do not possess his sermons to judge by, but it is very difficult to doubt that Bunyan was not only edifying but entertaining—a dreadful

thing to say of a preacher of that period. His thought ran evidently very close to life and his speech was racy and redolent of the soil, not to mention the fact that he was a layman. He himself started from experience. Experience it was that drew the famous types in his greatest book. Thus we have the personal note with a very brilliant use of the colloquial anecdotal style.

There were reasons why Bunyan did not greatly influence the preaching of the Baptist denomination. For a long time after his day preaching was entirely on the Puritan lines. Robert Hall added something in the way of style (aided by his friend John Foster), but even Robert Hall's preaching has more affinity with the best Puritan tradition than with the open-air style of Bunyan. With Robert Hall also the substance was mainly the system of theology, although by now the system seems to exist in its own right, almost apart from the Scriptures, and the main aim is not so much to teach the Scriptures as to make clear the system. At the same time the Methodist revival had done its work. The racy speech of laymen and the appeal to experience was coming rapidly into Baptist pulpits especially in the country districts. Bunyan's day was about to dawn.

Spurgeon loved to declare his indebtedness to Bunyan, and indeed Spurgeon was a return to Bunyan's manner. He had the same earnestness and the same passionate desire to win men. There was, in fact, a good deal of the revivalist in him. Further, he was and remained something of a layman. It meant much that he missed going to College. Also in his attitude to doctrine and the Bible, Spurgeon would have found much in common with the Baptists of Bunyan's day. Of course, he made great use of Scripture and is regarded to-day as the father of Scriptural preachers. But his use of Scripture was very different from, say, that of Maclaren. As a matter of fact, Spurgeon returned to the Calvinistic system, and his preaching was largely the enforcement and exposition of the system. He went to the Scriptures to find the system and illustrations for it.

Here, however, two qualifications are necessary. First, Spurgeon's Calvinism had been modified by years of Arminian teaching. He started with the Calvinists' vigorous opposition to everything that savoured of Arminianism. But also he himself, in most emphatic terms, distinguished his own brand of Calvinism from hyper-Calvinism. In the years Calvinism had been, to a large extent, humanised, and it was this humanised Calvinism that Spurgeon preached as the gospel.

The second qualification comes from a recognition of the genius of the man. It is no use looking here for logical consistency. Also, in spite of what has been said about his exposition of the Calvinistic system, there was in him a regard

for the teaching of Scripture as such, and often his expositions of Scripture passages are such as would scarcely harmonise with the ideas of the system. Thus one sermon at times seems to contradict the presuppositions of another. Also, it is this that accounts for passages here and there which when quoted out of their context surprise people by their modernity—compare e.g., the passage denouncing war from the text "He maketh wars to cease." Many illustrations of the same thing could be found. Yet on the whole his emphasis was Calvinistic and his preaching gained from the definiteness which such a system gives.

His definiteness was undoubtedly part of the secret of his power. His mental make-up was unusual and such as it would be difficult to find in the modern world. Apparently he was absolutely convinced by the time he was eighteen. Nor was he ever troubled by any doubt of the validity of his creed. He talks on occasion about the temptations of doubt and unbelief, but he himself was a stranger to that mental conflict which is often so poignant in our day. The tremendous ferment of thought, the literature and poetry of the time seems to have had no influence upon him. He lived in his own world and troubled nothing about any other world of thought in which men were moving. In accepting the London pastorate he wrote, at the age of eighteen, "I have scarcely ever known the fear of man." It was this definiteness that made his criticisms of others, even honoured ministers, so outspoken as to give the impression of arrogance. But equally it was this mental characteristic that carried his message to thousands. He had a gospel which he could apply to sinners, and he applied it, applied it with the same assurance of its efficacy. Many found salvation through him, but it is not derogatory to Spurgeon to say that there was a necessary type of ministry in that age of ferment which he himself could not touch. There were needs of the mind to which he could not minister. Nor did he see the need for such a ministry or show himself sympathetic to it. He had remarkable success in his own work. It is not surprising if he came to think of his own type of ministry as the one type for the work of God amongst men.

However, it must be recognised that in that peculiar type of ministry Spurgeon was the master. Once let it be granted that the Calvinistic scheme is the way of salvation and that men come to it by the hearing of the Word, then it must be admitted that Spurgeon has had few equals in the deftness with which he applied the doctrine to various human conditions. He had a remarkable intuition into certain definite human states. None will deny that the Calvinistic theology is closely related

to needs of the soul. There is a reading of man at the back of it as well as a doctrine of God. In that reading of man Spurgeon was well educated. He knew well the fears and hopes which belong to man on the religious side. He knew how to appeal to the elemental emotions and how to use the primary instincts. He himself was an elemental personality, and it was to the elemental in man that he made his appeal. Consequently his subjects were never trivial. What he had to say seemed always to be important, and, further, important for the individual. There was a certain personal intimacy about it, and many a story is told of how a casual hearer imagined that the great preacher had been told some secret about the said hearer's life. It was his knowledge of human nature that enabled him to particularise, but his very particularisation was general. Every state he described would fit many men, because the preacher was always concerned with what men have in common rather than with the fine variations of human personality. For him the correlative to God was man. And it is probably true to say that he knew man better than men.

His theology itself helped towards this directness. He had cultivated the habit of going straight to the point, and often straight *at* the person he intended to reach. The matter was too urgent for any other way of approach. Thus there was no kidglove handling of truth, just as there were no fine gradations in the truth he handled. He hit out hard. To-day people call it rudeness or presumption, but the manifest earnestness of purpose did a great deal to make it both effective and acceptable. He talked as though God himself and the hearer were the whole universe. He made people feel that once they stepped into the circle of grace the whole blessing of God was theirs. It was all intimate, personal. The sin was specified but so was the blessing, and if the sin was personal so again was the grace. This is one of the most patent characteristics of almost all his sermons. Consequently his message, with the peculiar form of its application to human conditions and its relevance to human needs, must be put down as one of his chief sources of power. That many people found his message acceptable is admitted. There was a body of Calvinistic opinion in existence at the time. Spurgeon said what many people wanted saying, and he said it well.

He said it well. This leads to the consideration of his style. And here Spurgeon was a pioneer. His style and method were so original as to be a stumbling-block and confusion to many of his contemporaries. He was original enough to invite caricature and famous enough to provoke *Punch*. The most obvious thing about his style is that it was homely. And in this again he goes

back to Bunyan. But in it he was, for his own day, original. If one reads, say, a sermon by John Ryland and then one by Spurgeon, one realises at once that though the theological landmarks are the same the landscape is different. Spurgeon was, in fact, one of the first to bring the colloquial element into preaching. This was seen, not only in the speech, but also in the illustrations and subject matter. Everyone admits that Spurgeon was a master of illustration, and almost everything would serve, from an apple in a bottle to a scene on the Riviera. Things were now mentioned in a pulpit which many would have said were beneath the dignity of preaching. In style, divinity has now become humanity. Thus common people heard the Word in their own tongue. It was not only their own speech but it was all about their everyday things. This is one of the reasons why Spurgeon is readable to-day. He is always interesting and often entertaining. His rich flow of humour is seen in his *Lectures to Students*, and no doubt it came out at times in the pulpit, yet very rarely does it betray Spurgeon into a breach of good taste. There is no doubt that in all this Spurgeon had a tremendous influence on the preaching of his time. Everybody now illustrates divine truth with homely illustration. We have found something of the same kind in the Gospels themselves. Thus for our day theology was brought down from the great halls into the common houses. Spurgeon clothed it in homespun, and on every hand preaching has benefited by this side of his ministry. Few could "get it across" as Spurgeon did.

At the same time let it not be imagined that Spurgeon was cheap because he was homely. Nearly all the elements of a good style are abundantly manifest in his work. His preaching and writing were clear, sincere, vigorous. He had a gift of apt expression which few have equalled, and on occasion when the theme demanded it he could be elevated and chaste. Part of his success was due to the concrete, vivid picturesqueness of his style. He shared with Bunyan the ability to draw a picture or sketch a type in a few pithy sentences—while his ability to clench a paragraph with an epigrammatic sentence is really remarkable. Thus, after describing humorously and somewhat sarcastically the effeminate, foppish preacher, he makes the point that people go to *see* such, not to hear them, and he concludes with the sentence, "Few ears are delighted with the voices of peacocks" (*Lectures to Students*, p. 131). In the same lecture on Posture, Action and Gesture, he has a couple of pages on pulpits—an essay which very few of our best writers could excel. In fact, had Spurgeon served an apprenticeship to literature, so far as style is concerned, he

could have reached a great height. But then, would Spurgeon have had any style at all apart from the gospel?

On this point it may perhaps be worth while emphasising that Spurgeon was not an uneducated man. He was not greatly indebted, it is true, to the schools. But he read much on certain lines and at times we are somewhat surprised by his wealth of allusion. What he did know, he knew thoroughly—the Bible, for example, Bunyan, Cowper and certain theological commentaries and works. His use of Scripture shows a wonderfully fertile mind, and many of his quotations are apt with an aptness which is truly original. He does not despise a tag of Latin on occasion (*Lectures to Students*, p. 77, &c.). On Gesture he quotes Homer (in translation) and refers to the statue of Minerva (ditto, p. 96). It is, in fact, interesting and revealing to take a page or two of his writings, examining the references and quotations. They reveal the stored mind of a well-read man. And yet, even more, they indicate an astonishing vitality. Everything comes in so aptly as though all came together out of the crucible of thought.

Thus, while in theological emphasis Spurgeon belonged to the age that was closing rather than to the one that was then being born, in the matter of style the reverse is the truth. In style he was a pioneer and his influence was enduring. His was a type of preaching that common men could imitate. This talking about common things in simple language seemed possible to all. Consequently the lay ministry was greatly stimulated and many were content to model their preaching on that of Spurgeon. Unfortunately they lacked Spurgeon's genius and many of them became merely anecdotal.

The *Biography* by W. Y. Fullerton gives not a few discriminating appreciations of Spurgeon as a preacher (Chapters X and XIV). One is quoted (p. 267) saying that it was the composite character of Spurgeon's preaching which really accounted for its infinite charm. That is obviously true. He had gifts—great gifts, and he used them to the full. But also he had a message, and a message in which he wholly believed. His mentality is difficult to analyse but it was not by any means the least factor in his success. He had devotion to Christ, of course. But is it not true that he had a great devotion to the scheme of salvation—the Calvinistic theology? There are minds of that order. They are vigorous in and for a system of thought. It is this which gives justification for the saying that theology makes strong men. Spurgeon was a strong man of a particular School. Whatever the secret, he was "clothed in power."

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