

# Charles Simeon of Cambridge

**A man who faced and overcame rejection in his parish and maintained and acted on a lifelong vision for the Church both in England and worldwide.**

IAN CHAPMAN

Charles Simeon was one of the most remarkable and influential clergymen of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Born in Reading, he came from a wealthy background and was educated at Eton. He later went to King's College Cambridge where he experienced a life-changing conversion to Christianity. As well as being a bachelor fellow of King's he was appointed perpetual curate of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge in November 1782 where he served until his death in 1836.

Simeon was one of the foremost preachers of his age and one of the outstanding characters of the Evangelical Revival. He pioneered the idea of teaching homiletics to ordinands and is a major figure in the development of biblical preaching in the Anglican church. He published his sermon outlines in the twenty-one volume *Horae Homileticae*, a work of inestimable value and influence. Simeon was also innovative in the buying up of livings, contributing to a sound base for future Evangelicalism, and a major influence in the formation of such movements as the Church Missionary Society, the Bible Society and the Jews' Society.

His ministry at Holy Trinity began amid bitter opposition and controversy which continued in varying degrees for around thirty years. Despite this he persevered and well before his death he had become a beloved and influential minister. He was also opposed and ostracized within the academic world of Cambridge. Again perseverance enabled him to attain to great influence, especially through the many opportunities he later had to preach the University sermon. Among the college posts he held were dean of arts, dean of divinity, and vice provost. By the end of his life Simeon was loved and revered by many.

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This study begins with some words written in Simeon's hand on a scrap of paper among archive material at Ridley Hall Cambridge:

Marvellous has been the mercy vouchsafed to me this day. Such unanimity has never been seen in my parish from the first day that I became connected with it until the present hour, except that ferocious unanimity displayed against the gospel when first I came among them God has given me every desire of my heart.

The date is 6 February 1832, the fiftieth year since his appointment at Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge. Simeon goes on to describe these mercies which include 'the transfer of the lectureship in the afternoon to an entire evening service on the Sunday evening', and the establishment of an additional Thursday evening lectureship. He has also secured the appointment of his beloved curate, the Rev W A Carus, as his successor.

The unanimity he writes of is a far cry from the virulent opposition and attendant controversy which accompanied his appointment and was strongly manifested during his first ten years at Holy Trinity. It arose again around 1811, nearly thirty years after Simeon's appointment, but this time on a smaller scale.

It is widely considered that the main cause of this opposition was Simeon's gospel preaching. A plaque displayed at Holy Trinity on the permanent exhibition stand commemorating Simeon states, 'His appointment was violently opposed by the Churchwardens and the people, largely due to the directness of his Gospel preaching'.

However Simeon has generally been portrayed in a good light. (See for instance C H Simpkinson's essay in *Typical English Churchman* [SPCK: Brighton 1902] or H Evan Hopkins' biography.) This portrayal is usually based on Simeon's supposedly saintly reaction to opposition. Typical is R W Heinze's comment: 'His response to all this (opposition) was incredible, almost saintly patience'.<sup>1</sup>

The uniformly positive standpoint taken by such writers leads one to suspect that they have indulged in evangelical hagiography and that the view of his opponents has not been fully considered. It does not seem logical for opposition to run so deeply and for so long just out of pure spite. Did something in Simeon's character antagonize people? Was his reaction really as saintly as is supposed? Was he not a misguided zealot who should have declined the living graciously? Could a ministry which was so opposed claim any success?

1 R W Heinze 'Charles Simeon – through the eyes of an American Lutheran' *Churchman* vol 93 1979 pp 240–51

It is the early years of Simeon's ministry to which this study will pay close attention. It will attempt an examination of the opposition to Simeon at Holy Trinity and his subsequent reactions in an endeavour to arrive at a balanced view of what happened. It will also contribute to the wider effort to assess Simeon's character.

For clarification the term 'opposition' is intended to describe things of a nature personally obstructive to Simeon's ministry, character or motives. 'Reaction' includes anything concerning the defence, justification, or vindication of his ministry, character or motives.

Firstly we shall consider the events surrounding Simeon's appointment together with background information concerning Holy Trinity Church and its lectureship.

Simeon's memoirs record that having been ordained on 26 May 1782, he began his ministry at St Edward's Church, Cambridge, looking after the church during the minister Mr Aitkinson's long summer vacation. It seems there was quickly a positive response to Simeon's ministry. 'I have reason to hope that some good was done there. In the space of a month or six weeks the church became quite crowded; the Lord's table was attended by three times the number of communicants, and a considerable stir was made among the dry bones.'<sup>2</sup> Henry Venn described the response in much more positive terms: 'In less than seventeen Sundays... he filled it with hearers – a thing unknown for near a century'.<sup>3</sup> This positive response to Simeon is noteworthy because just a short while later he preached similar sermons and the response was completely different.

His brother Richard had died, leaving an aged father, whom Simeon determined to go and live with and look after in his infirmity. He was packed and ready to leave when he heard that the incumbent of Holy Trinity, Mr Therond, had died. 'I had often, when passing Holy Trinity Church... said within myself, how I would rejoice if God were to give me that church, that I might preach His Gospel there, and be a herald for Him in the midst of the University'.<sup>4</sup> Holy Trinity was then a substantial parish of nearly two thousand souls, accounting for almost 25 per cent of the population of Cambridge. Simeon saw little hope of attaining the position but it so happened that the only bishop with whom his father was acquainted had just been translated to the See of Ely and Holy Trinity Church was at that time in the Bishop of Ely's gift.<sup>5</sup>

2 W A Carus *Memoirs of the Life of Rev Charles Simeon MA* (London: Hatchards 1847). Further references will be abbreviated to Carus.

3 Carus p 27

4 Carus pp 41–2

5 Vestry Records p 22 Cambridge Record Office

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He continues: 'I therefore sent off instantly to my father, to desire him to make application to the Bishop for the living on my behalf'.<sup>6</sup> He also records that the parishioners of Trinity were keen to procure the living for Mr Hammond, who had served the parish as curate for some time. They immediately chose Hammond as lecturer, 'concluding that the living without the lectureship would not be worth anyone's acceptance; it being, even with the surplice fees, not worth more than forty guineas per annum'.<sup>7</sup>

At this stage some background on the history of the 'afternoon lectureship' is helpful. The Sunday Lectureship was founded by will of Alderman Faune in 1551, revised in the early seventeenth century by public subscription and soon became fixed at Holy Trinity. It was filled by puritan divines in the seventeenth century and evangelical revivalists in the nineteenth century. Parishioners of other Cambridge churches attended the lectures, necessitating the erection of the North Gallery in 1616.<sup>8</sup> (It is notable that no mention is made of the eighteenth century. Michael Rees, writing as Vicar in 1977, remarks that during the eighteenth century 'Holy Trinity, like other churches, seems slowly to have lost its zeal'.)<sup>9</sup>

Vestry records indicate that a considerable depth of feeling arose within the church concerning the appointment and the lectureship. It is clear from the records that the general practice had been for the lectureship to be held by the minister of the church. This was not so when Simeon arrived.

Thursday the 14th Day of November 1782.

We the Church Wardens & inhabitants of the said Parish, being this day met in vestry according to public notice given in the church yesterday to choose another Lecturer do unanimously choose the Rev John Hammond, Master of Arts, and Fellow of Queens' College to be Lecturer and Catechist in the room of the said Mr Henry Therond deceased.<sup>10</sup>

This is followed by nearly one hundred signatories, a significant figure; earlier documented items of vestry business generally have five to seven signatories. It may be suggested that the selection of a lecturer was not a routine matter but previous documented instances of the appointment of the lecturer, for instance the Rev Elias Thackeray in 1770 and the Rev Henry Therond in 1776 have only thirty and twenty signatures

6 Carus pp 41-2

7 Carus pp 41-2

8 Cambridge Record Office

9 Michael Rees *Holy Trinity Church* (HTC Booklet 1977)

10 Vestry Records Cambridge Record Office

respectively. A similar pattern is apparent in earlier years. In all cases the same procedure was followed. Further, in 1782 twelve parishioners were illiterate and therefore made only their mark, as against only one on all the previous occasions cited. This suggests that feelings were running very high and also that considerable effort may have gone into drumming up support.

The turn of events can be traced in the following correspondence. In May 1782, Simeon's father wrote to the Bishop of Ely. The Bishop replied:

I understood before I received your letter, that your son was on my list of candidates for orders on Sunday next. I shall be very glad to see him at that time and to learn from him a good account of your family.

I dare say he will approve himself on the occasion a hopefull minister in the church, and as such it will give me pleasure to countenance him. The particular object of his wish is so general a one with other members of the University of his description that it is not easy to gratify it.<sup>11</sup>

Ordination to deacon followed on 26 May 1782. The Bishop of Ely's offer of appointment to Holy Trinity was on 9 November 1782:

The Church Wardens of Trinity Parish Cambridge, by the same post which brings me your application to succeed Mr Therond as Curate there, inform me you have declined in favour of Mr Hammond.

From respect to your father (who had wrote in your favour) & confidence in your character I had otherwise intended to have entrusted this preferment to your care, and if you are at liberty from any engagement I now answer your letter with my consent. The parishioners have petitioned for Mr Hammond and unless gratified thus intimate their intention of bestowing their lectureship on a different person than my curate. I do not like that mode of application and if you do not accept it, should actually not license Mr Hammond to it. I shall await your answer.<sup>12</sup>

Note that this letter is a response to Simeon's application for the position at Holy Trinity, a point to which we will return. On realizing how violent the parishioners were for Hammond he went to the vestry and told them that as a minister of peace, with no wish for the living but to do them good he would, if it seemed not improper, write to the Bishop declining further

11 MS Ridley Hall Cambridge

12 MS Ridley Hall Cambridge

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competition. He did so, but the letter missed the post, and Simeon subsequently held on to the letter.

He decided to wait on the Bishop's decision; 'I will wait the event; if the Bishop give Mr H the living, it is as well; and if he give it to me I will appoint Mr H my substitute, with the whole profits of the living and continue him in the situation as long as he chooses to hold it'.<sup>13</sup> In the event, the terms of the Bishop's offer made fulfilment of Simeon's commitment to Mr Hammond impossible, Simeon, writing thirty years later, saw the hand of God in this: 'Thus did God interpose to deliver me from a difficulty which seemed almost insurmountable'.<sup>14</sup>

There are several factors which may have contributed to the unpopularity of Simeon's appointment.

(i) There was a mutual affection between Hammond and the parishioners. A W Brown, writing in 1863,<sup>15</sup> states that the parishioners wished the living to be given to the one who was their favourite preacher, Mr Hammond. He was well established as curate and his signature can be found on marriage and baptism certificates going back to 1777, a year after Therond was given the lectureship. Simple fondness for their curate was a major reason for their wish to appoint Hammond.

(ii) A young inexperienced curate, who was not even priested, was being preferred to the man of their choice. Feelings of resentment are not explicitly stated in the records: they are rather expressed by their actions. Such resentment is understandable.

(iii) In asking his father to intervene with the bishop, Simeon seems presumptuous, especially considering the status of the bishopric. As recorded in Ely episcopal records (printed for private circulation, Lincoln 1891), the Bishop of Ely had until recently a temporal jurisdiction second only in importance to the Bishop of Durham.

The wording of the bishop's letter implies that Simeon had applied directly by letter regarding the living, as the bishop mentions receiving Simeon's application by the same post as the wardens' letter and also in his second paragraph states 'I now answer your letter', (this cannot be Simeon's letter offering to decline which was never sent). If there was such a letter, it heightens the impression of presumption on Simeon's part. It is not mentioned by Simeon in his memoirs. Why is this? Was it oversight

13 Carus p 43

14 Carus p 43

15 A W Brown *Recollections of the Conversation Parties of the Rev Charles Simeon MA with Introductory Notices* (London: Hamilton Adams & Co 1863) p 2

through writing some thirty years later? Did Simeon see his part in events in a better light than a fully detailed account would have shown him? The existence of this additional letter remains a matter for speculation; it does not appear in Simeon's correspondence, neither has it shown up in a search of the Ely episcopal records which contain all correspondence of the Bishops of Ely. However, the impression of presumption remains. It was an impression which was likely to offend.

It is also possible that Simeon's lifelong habit of vanity of dress offended and contributed to provoking opposition. It was widely commented on, as H Venn wrote later in commenting on the change in Simeon: 'this is the young man so vain of dress, that he constantly allowed more than £50 per year for his own person'.<sup>16</sup>

(iv) Simeon's gospel preaching could be only a stumbling block to the appointment if he had developed a reputation which reached the parishioners. There is insufficient evidence to suggest that this had happened. However, St Edmund's, where he had begun to establish a reputation, is close to Holy Trinity. That his reputation had gone before him cannot be ruled out.

(v) Prejudice against methodists and enthusiasts was strong. M Hennel writing in *John Venn & the Clapham Sect* records that evangelical clergy were 'isolated & despised as dangerous enthusiasts by other clergy'. (Venn had been refused admission to Trinity College by the Master and Tutor, since they were aware of his father's convictions.) But as with Simeon's gospel preaching, the prejudice would have been provoked only if his reputation had gone before him.

The evidence does not support the view that Simeon's gospel preaching was the major cause of the initial opposition. Each of the factors noted could have contributed but evidence suggests the main cause was simply that the parishioners loved John Hammond and wanted him. They felt, too, that Simeon was foisted on them, in which case their reaction is understandable.

With the value of the living reduced and with such obvious opposition, why did Simeon accept? Why not graciously withdraw and look elsewhere? Consideration of these questions indicates something of the paradox in Simeon. He was a mixture of humble sincerity and presumptuous confidence. His sincerity is shown by his stated primary reason for hoping for the living, 'that I might preach His Gospel there, and be a herald for Him', and the element of presumption already noted

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suggests a very confident young man. His confidence, which might seem pompous arrogance to some people, leads to what I describe as the 'gentle thick-skinnedness' which prevented the barbed arrows of his opponents from penetrating fatally. As he was financially secure, the reduction in the value of the living was of minor effect and so, because of his zeal to preach the gospel and because he felt his actions had been vindicated, he accepted.

The opposition to Simeon's ministry at Holy Trinity developed in three main areas.

The first manifestation of strong opposition was the locking of the pews by parishioners. Apart from Simeon's efforts to provide benches, this would have meant preaching either to an empty church or to a congregation which could only stand in the aisles.

Simeon's memoirs record his attempts to place benches in the church at his own expense. These were thrown out by the church officers. He saw 'no remedy but faith and patience. The passage of scripture which subdued and controlled my mind was, "the servant of the Lord must not strive"'. He tells how painful to him was the sight of the church, almost forsaken. He thought that if God would give 'a double blessing to those who did attend' as much good would be done as if the number were doubled. Without such reflections, he tells us 'I should have sunk under my burdens'.<sup>17</sup> His frustration must have been great. He faced a church partially locked and half empty while John Hammond had opportunity to reach those to whom Simeon felt appointed to minister.

Simeon's memoirs do not record exactly when people began to desist from locking the pews. Writing about the situation five years later he says:

By this time I had gained some footing in the parish... there was a bitter and persecuting spirit among all the heads of other parish... the greater part of the pews still continued shut; but though I was persuaded that the parishioners had no right to lock them up, there being only one faculty pew in the church.<sup>18</sup>

Also of note here is A W Brown's comment in referring to Simeon's later seeking Sir William Scott's Opinion concerning the evening lectureship, 'the Clergy are indebted... for the equally clear principle that no one but faculty pews (if even they) can be locked up'.<sup>19</sup>

17 Carus p 44

18 Carus p 65

19 A W Brown *Recollections of the Conversation Parties of the Rev Charles Simeon MA with Introductory Notices* (London: Hamilton Adams & Co 1863) p 3



Interestingly, Simeon not only desists from enforcing the legal position but does not even make the culprits aware of the rights and wrongs of the situation. It is revealing how his memoirs continue:

I was restrained from attempting to open them by that divine declaration, 'the servant of the Lord must not strive'. Many hundreds of times has that one word tied my hands, when a concern for immortal souls, and a sense of the injury done to my ministry, would have prompted me to take off the locks.<sup>20</sup>

Simeon's words reveal the frustration and sense of injury which the opposition caused to him. They also emphasize his concern for the flock. Above all he emphasizes again a verse of Scripture which had a profound influence upon him. It is a text which calls for submission to God and Simeon's reaction was to obey. Later we shall see a similar response when the church members sought to preclude his conduct of a service at 6 pm.

The second area of opposition concerns Simeon's pastoral ministry. He was virtually unable to visit parishioners during the first years of opposition. 'To visit the parishioners in their own houses was impracticable; for they were so embittered against me, that there was scarcely one that would admit me into his house.'<sup>21</sup> Despite this, he maintained his pastoral concern. This was manifested in various ways and was encouraged by a particular incident.

This incident is related at length by Simeon in his memoirs.<sup>22</sup> While waiting in Horsleydown churchyard to conduct a funeral he was reading the epitaphs on tombstones. Seeing one which he thought characterized a Christian he looked around for someone to whom God might render it 'the means of spiritual instruction'. He saw at a distance a young woman reading epitaphs and calling her he told her to read one which read 'When from the dust of death I rise, To claim my mansion in the skies, Ev'n then shall this be my plea – Jesus hath liv'd and died for me'. When she could say this in her own heart she would be happy indeed. She read the epitaph without noticeable interest and then explained that she was feeling very distressed. Pressed as to the reason for this she explained that she had an aged mother and two young children. She had ruined her health in caring for them and could no longer support them. Simeon comforted her temporarily and later visited the family. He records their appalling destitution and that the mother was near to death. Deeply moved he proceeded to minister to them, both spiritually and financially. This continued until he felt their situation was stable. After this he continued to

20 Carus p 65

21 Carus p 44

22 Carus pp 49–54

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provide for their welfare.

The woman later told him that at the point they met in the churchyard she had been about to take her life. She would of course have left her dependants utterly hopeless. She felt that in that moment, through Simeon, God had come to her. Through his ministrations she had been led to certain knowledge of her own salvation in Christ and recovered to be able to support her dependants. Her mother who died soon after was also able to go to death in the sure knowledge of salvation in Christ.

This incident proved a great strength and encouragement to Simeon. Carus records Simeon recalling the event thirty years later. 'If my whole life had been spent without any other compensation than this, my labours had been richly recompensed.'

It was particularly important in confirming to himself that he should persist in religious conversation on pastoral matters. '...how mistaken are those physicians and apothecaries, who imagine that religious conversation with patients has a tendency to impede their cure. Here is a case where the woman was very ill in body... distressed in mind, whom all the drugs in their dispensary could not have cured.'<sup>23</sup> This encouragement came at a time when his fervent intensity in such matters was under siege from all sides.

Simeon found opportunities to minister on a wider scale, which would offset some of the frustration he felt at the situation in his own parish. His large contribution to the relief of the bread famine in 1788 is a good example. He took a great interest and made an immense contribution to the relief of the surrounding villages, and later also sought to help those distressed in the town itself. Carus records Simeon formulating and overseeing a plan to sell bread (subsidized by himself) at half price. It is worth noting here that this was one of the first incidents which opened the eyes of those in the University, where he was also bitterly opposed and ridiculed, to the real character of Simeon.

Further evidence as to his benevolence is shown in an extant fragment of his accounts book.<sup>24</sup> The date shown in this book is 1789-93. The figures are meticulously recorded and show that from early in his ministry he began to give away a third of his income. The totals are 'Received £3810:3:7d, given £1290:3:6d'. The charities given to are listed and include: Villages, Ch. Schools, Subs. Widows, Local Ministers, Locke/Pillanth., Reading School, Mission W. House, Hospital.<sup>25</sup>

23 Carus p 53

24 Ridley Hall Archives Cambridge

25 Simeon's abbreviations

The third area of opposition concerns Simeon's preaching ministry and the closely allied controversy concerning his attempts to start an evening lecture.

Simeon was young and strikingly awkward. This caused some to hesitate in going fully with him despite his open earnestness and sincerity. Hopkins cites a letter of Simeon's friend, Thomas Dykes, who in 1786 went up to Magdalene College. Dykes states that Simeon was 'one of the most unlikely persons to become extensively useful that he had known... much zeal but not according to knowledge... apparent affectation of manner... egotism and a self-importance which seemed likely to neutralize any good effect of his ministry...'.<sup>26</sup> His preaching was crude and undigested, containing many striking remarks but abounding in incorrect statements and allusions offensive to good taste. If this is how a friend described Simeon, what would his enemies have said?

Simeon's own comments on his preaching suggest that his friend Dyke did not exaggerate: 'When I first began to write I knew no more than a brute how to make a sermon, and after a year or so I gave up writing and began to preach from notes'.<sup>27</sup>

A W Brown recalls sitting near a married undergraduate's family when Simeon was preaching. Their two little girls looked at the strange preacher with amazement, even alarm, and whispered, 'O Mama, what is the gentleman in a passion about?' As Carus points out, it is '...highly probable that the opposition and ridicule he encountered in the earliest part of his ministry may be attributed very much to the manner and not merely the matter of his preaching'.<sup>28</sup>

The 'matter' of his preaching is demonstrated in this extract from a sermon preached at Holy Trinity in early 1783. The handwritten script is replete with Simeon's own exclamation marks:

If you consulted your happiness only in this present life, one would think it impossible that you should reject Christ; for with him are promised all good things; all blessings temporal as well as eternal. But when your immortal souls are at stake, when for ought you know you may before another month is expired be hurried into eternity, be arraigned at the Tribunal of God, judged, condemned and doomed to everlasting misery, how can you reject the proffered salvation for a moment? It must be spoke to madmen. Oh then fly to him, let me not

26 H Evan Hopkins *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1977) p 45

27 A W Brown *Recollections of the Conversation Parties of the Rev Charles Simeon MA with Introductory Notices* (London: Hamilton Adams & Co 1863) p 62

28 Carus p 63

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... speak now in vain: Lord, it is thy word, let it not return to thee void. Nothing can benefit you here or hereafter but an interest in the blood of Jesus. I beseech you then be ever seeking to know and please him, read his gospel constantly, pray fervently, obey his commands...<sup>29</sup>

This is a small section out of some fourteen hand-written pages of a sermon on Romans 8:32. It starts and continues throughout at the same level of breathless intensity, there being no respite for the hearers.

Frustration at having only one sermon a week at Holy Trinity was offset by his being able to go to other churches to preach: 'I used on the weekdays to go round to the churches of pious ministers, very frequently, to preach to their people, taking one church on Mondays, another on Tuesdays, another on Wednesdays... these seasons I found very refreshing to my own soul'.<sup>30</sup> He recalls how this helped his composition because as he preached extempore he was able to reconsider subjects preached at Holy Trinity, clarifying them and enriching his illustrations.

About five years after Simeon's appointment, Hammond resigned. Simeon would have hoped for the lectureship but the opposition would not have it. Instead the parishioners chose the Rev Butler Berry of Trinity. According to Hopkins<sup>31</sup> he was the son of a parishioner, Isaac Berry, whose name was last on a list of eighty-five who signed the vestry document. Again the number considerably exceeded the usual and indicates the depth/orchestration of opposition.

Because the afternoon lectureship was filled by Hammond, Simeon had only one opportunity of preaching in the whole week. He decided to try and establish an evening lecture starting at six. He had hardly got underway before the wardens shut the church doors against him. He records that:

On one occasion the congregation was assembled and it was found that the churchwarden had gone away with the key in his pocket. I therefore got a smith to open the doors for that time but did not think it expedient to persist under such circumstances.<sup>32</sup>

The dating of events is not entirely clear. The memoirs note Simeon writing to John Venn and floating the idea of starting an evening lectureship on 16 July 1783.<sup>33</sup> He wrote again on 22 September 1783,

29 MS Ridley Hall Cambridge. This is noted as one of his earliest sermons preached at St Edmund's 17 November 1782 and Holy Trinity 11 May 1783.

30 Carus p 41

31 H Evan Hopkins *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1977) p 46

32 Carus p 45

33 Carus p 44 note

bemoaning in a lengthy postscript how the wardens had (illegally) prevented him continuing an evening lecture which he had established. However, the document concerning the wardens seeking a legal opinion is dated later (May 1784), almost eight months after Simeon ceased his efforts. Hopkins states that Simeon 'tried again a year later' but though Simeon did say 'I shall renew the lecture next summer', his memoirs do not record that he did actually try again.

I have discussed details of the timing of these events because if Simeon did try again it might demonstrate some inconsistency with his expressed decision not 'to strive'. The matter cannot be proved and there is no evidence of inconsistency in Simeon's reactions. Rather his graciousness is again emphasized: 'May God bless them with enlightening, sanctifying, and saving grace...' <sup>34</sup>

Pastoral concern also entered into these preaching matters. Late in 1783 Simeon was concerned that the minds of those who were impressed by his preaching, having no opportunity for further instruction, would be drawn from the church to go to dissenting meetings. He hired a room in the parish to teach them. This rapidly grew so that he had to seek a larger room which was outside the parish. He was deeply conscious of the irregularity of this and concerned that persecution would arise. He was most prayerful about the situation and despite Henry Venn's attempts to discourage this work he persisted, and no opposition came.

Simeon's willingness to let legality yield to a higher need is noteworthy. He records that after two or three years, 'my parish made a formal complaint against me to the bishop; they complained that I preached so as to alarm and to terrify them, and that the people came and crowded the church and stole their books'. It seems the church was more crowded but a malicious spirit still abounded with some.

Concerning Simeon's attempted evening lecture, there were two attempts to test the legality of the situation. Firstly in 1784, the parishioners complained and sought a legal opinion as is outlined in the Cambridge Vestry records:

The six o'clock service calls together a vast congregation, not only those living in town but from different parishes, six or seven miles from Cambridge, and is attended with inconvenience to the parishioners, their pews, and great detriment to the church in general, on that account the parishioners are desirous of suppressing the six o'clock meeting. It is apprehended the sequestrator can have

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no right or toleration to the church after the services in the afternoon except in burying the dead and other cases of necessity as the expense of upkeeping the whole church is supported and maintained by the parishioners...

The legal question was then put:

...Whether the sequestrator can support a right to a lecture at six o'clock in the evening and whether it is in the power of the churchwardens for the time being to hinder the same by locking up the church doors after prayers and sermon in the afternoon, first applying to the sequestrator upon the occasion, or what is more advisable upon the whole circumstances for the parishioners to do to suppress the six o'clock meeting in the church?

The answer, copied from the original response from William Wynne, is also recorded in those records:

I think the sequestrator cannot support a right of performing services and preaching a third time in the church at six o'clock in the afternoon on Sundays without the assent and approbation of the parishioners. The sequestrator is not incumbent and consequently has no property in the church to give him a right to go into it at all times whenever he thinks fit. And I think that if this service at six o'clock is a novelty in the parish and of real detriment to the church and disturbance to the parishioners the proper step for them to take would be to meet in the vestry and come to the resolution that it is so, and that the churchwardens shall be desired to lock the church doors after prayers and sermon in the afternoon are over, and to give the sequestrator a copy in writing of this resolution.

Wynne concludes that the wardens are justified in locking the church and the opinion is signed: 'Wm. Wynne, Doctors' Commons, May 24th 1784'.<sup>35</sup> The Vestry minutes also record the suggested resolution and that a copy of same be given to the Rev Mr Simeon on 2 June 1784.

Simeon himself sought an Opinion concerning the evening lectureship from Sir William Scott, a figure of some standing in ecclesiastical matters who is listed in the Ely Episcopal Records as having given the bishop an Opinion on certain charitable bequests. Simeon's letter, dated 28 March 1792, asks the following questions:

1st. Is six o'clock in the evening an uncanonical hour?

35 Vestry Records Cambridge Record Office

2nd. Have the church wardens a power to hinder me from officiating on a Sunday or on any other day at that hour?

3rd. On the supposition that they have is there any way of preventing the exercise of it by a vote of the parish?

4th. On the supposition that they have not, & yet attempt to exercise it, what would be proper for me to do?

Should I be justified in ordering the doors to be forced open? How should I proceed to prevent a repetition of their attempts? What must I do to secure the exercise of my rights?<sup>36</sup>

Scott's reply was prompt and brief:

I am of the opinion that the sequestrator has a right to the use of the church for performance of divine service at six o'clock in the evening if that hour is not disapproved by the bishop whose curate he is. The hour, being not uncanonical is a lawful hour for public worship, under the authority of the bishop, and the church wardens will subject themselves to a prosecution in the ecclesiastical court if they attempt to hinder the Minister from officiating. The Minister, if he has the approbation of the bishop (who during the vacancy, is the incumbent of this parish) is justified in ordering the doors to be forced open, and may project his right against any future invasion by proceeding against them for the obstruction in the ecclesiastical court.<sup>37</sup>

Sir William Scott's Opinion shows that Simeon could legally have proceeded with the evening lecture. As noted earlier he was also legally in the right concerning the question of the locked pews. Though the Opinion concerning the lecture came some time after his attempt to start an evening service, it is still remarkable that in neither case did he press matters further. He did not even advise his opponents of the true position. Such evidence strongly supports the line taken by biographers concerning his gracious response.

All this leaves an important question, as we come to look in more detail at Simeon's reactions – was not Simeon simply misguided in staying on at Holy Trinity in the face of such bitter opposition? There are two important pieces of evidence that can be brought to answer and refute this charge.

36 MS Vestry Records Cambridge Record Office

37 MS Vestry Records Cambridge Record Office

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Firstly, the parishioners' Opinion from William Wynne<sup>38</sup> refers to 'a vast congregation' and 'people coming from six and seven miles from Cambridge'. That was a long distance to travel and suggests strongly that people were responding positively to his preaching despite adverse comment and controversy.

Secondly, original vestry records at Cambridge Record Office show that the figures relating to the number of baptisms, marriages and burials conducted at Holy Trinity remained stable after the troubles started in November 1782. This evidence suggests that Simeon was able to carry out a normal public ministry and on that basis it was reasonable for him to stay.

Let us now consider some personal aspects of Simeon relating to the opposition to his ministry.

In the following vivid description of Simeon's character taken from Max Warren's *Charles Simeon* (1949), attention is drawn to the paradoxical nature of Simeon's character – his temper, impetuosity and intolerance are contrasted with triumph over temper and deep humility:

Simeon did not find himself an easy person to live with. "I have all my days", he once said, "felt my danger to lie on the side of precipitancy." Hot tempered by nature, he found clumsiness and carelessness in others an easy spur to anger.

Impetuous in his likes and dislikes, he found it hard to adapt himself to those who moved more slowly. Extravagant in his affections, he found the way of friendship often difficult. It is one of the marvels of spiritual history that a man thus tempered should have been able so to subdue his spirit as to face the years of opposition from parishioners, and the contempt and often hostility of the University, and in the end to win from all so great a regard. It was this triumph over his temper which was at once the proof of his conversion and the secret of his perseverance in his long ministry. Perhaps only a man who knew how to be abased could be trusted with the ability to abound. The same eagerness which led to temper, led also to a readiness to seek forgiveness, both from God and from those he had wronged. There was no pride in the man, yet the deepest thing in Simeon was his humility. There could be no highmindedness in one who was humbled in thankfulness.

After Simeon's appointment John Hammond signed himself 'minister'

38 Vestry Records Cambridge Record Office



in the marriage records (up to the time of his being given the lectureship he had signed himself curate).<sup>39</sup> In his letter of resignation, due to ill-health, he still refers to himself as ‘minister’.<sup>40</sup> In the same letter he says ‘I pray to God to bless you and give you every spiritual comfort in the person you shall make choice to succeed me’, and in the postscript he hopes that his ‘successor will indulge me with the use of the pulpit to take my leave of my friends...’. The lack of respect for Simeon and his office in these documents is staggering, and his response, or lack of it, is most revealing. There does not seem to be any suggestion that Simeon allowed himself to be provoked. If he perceived this lack of respect then his response is remarkable and shows a strength which is a major factor in his response – that is his patience with the opposition.

Simeon also had a sense of ‘separateness’ from controversy. It is likely that this helped to prevent him being too deeply wounded and enabled him to keep his eye fixed on the work in hand. Brown records Simeon’s words on how as a young man he strictly regarded the injunction to ‘come out and be separate’:

I did so, both because I was tinder, and did not like to go near sparks; and because they might notice my compliance, and assail me with endeavours to draw me still further; then my compliance would be reckoned either victory on their part or yielding on mine. Were I a young man I should do the same now.<sup>41</sup>

It seems that naïvete helped blunt the sharper edges of opposition; the element of ‘underworldliness’ which A W Brown notes meant that Simeon did not fully perceive the slights or motives of his opponents.

Humility was a further major factor in Simeon’s response, together with a humble awareness of his own weaknesses and defects. It is clearly shown in his own words introducing his memoirs:

I begin with my early life – but what an awful scene does that present to my view! Never have I reviewed it for thirty-four years past, nor ever can I till my dying hour, without the deepest shame and sorrow. My vanity, my folly, my wickedness. God alone knoweth, or can bear to know.<sup>42</sup>

Again, as his curate Carus records:

39 MS Cambridge Record Office

40 Vestry Records Cambridge Record Office

41 A W Brown *Recollections of the Conversation Parties of the Rev Charles Simeon MA with Introductory Notices* (London: Hamilton Adams & Co 1863) p 131

42 Carus p 4

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No one could be more conscious than Mr Simeon was of his besetting sins, or more ready to receive advice or reproof, that he might “abstain from all appearance of evil” and “study to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things”. This was much noticed at the time by his most intimate friends.<sup>43</sup>

Simeon’s view of the fiduciary nature of saving faith, and that salvation is entirely of grace, explains much, particularly how he was able to trust entirely in God through such trials. It also explains the assurance of which writers such as Ford K Brown have been so disparaging, a matter to which we will return. This view of faith is to be seen clearly on a printed fragment, dated 1819, which is preserved in Ridley Hall:

...But when I found that justifying grace was a faith of affiance, and not a faith of assurance my peace returned: because though I had not a faith of assurance, I had as full a conviction that I relied on the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation, as I had of my own existence. From that time to the present hour I have never lost my hope and confidence in my adorable Saviour... With this sweet hope of ultimate acceptance before God I have always enjoyed much cheerfulness before men; but I have at the same time laboured incessantly to cultivate the deepest humility before God.

Equal, if not greater, was Simeon’s view of the whole scheme of redemption, from a hand-written account of his last few days:

‘Yes,’ said he, ‘it is to the principles I look. It is upon the broad, grand principles of the Gospel that I repose... not any particular promise here or there... any little portions of the word... but I wish to look at the grand whole – at the vast scheme of redemption as from eternity to eternity...’<sup>44</sup>

This sense of the wondrous nature of redemption led Simeon to a powerful sense of the minister’s weight of responsibility to his flock. The following illustrates this. It is an extract from a sermon which Simeon preached at Holy Trinity on the 27 April 1783, when opposition was at its peak. The text is 1 Corinthians 2:3. He entitled the sermon the *Ministerial Duties*:

If a minister is, for his own sins, to be cast into the lake of fire that shall never be quenched, how horrid will it be when many of the poor souls who are in the same condemnation cry out for the

43 Carus p 73

44 Ridley Hall Archives Cambridge

execution of tenfold vengeance upon him: how dreadful I say when the punishment of his own sins will receive additional weight for every soul which he has neglected to warn of its danger. Is this not enough to make ministers tremble? That faithfull & zealous labourer St Paul could not think of this without some new alarms, 'Knowing', says he, 'the terror of the Lord!' That is, the judgement to come mentioned in the previous verse, 'we persuade men!' Thus you see how truly every conscientious pastor may take to himself these words and say, 'I was with you in much fear and trembling'.<sup>45</sup>

The sermon begins at a peak intensity and never lets up. But the conviction is clear and is one which Simeon carried throughout his life.

A great strength of Simeon in his trials is described by Carus: '...it will be easily understood how he was enabled to endure them with meekness and even regard them as "mercies", when his eminently devotional habits at this period are considered'.<sup>46</sup> He also records the words of Simeon's intimate, the Rev H Houseman: 'Never did I see one who abounded so much in prayer'. Houseman told Carus that Simeon 'invariably rose every morning, though it was the winter season, at four o'clock; and after lighting his fire, he devoted the first four hours of the day to private prayer, and the devotional study of the Scriptures'. Later he called in his friend and his servant and engaged them in what he called his family prayer. For Carus 'here was the secret of his great grace and spiritual strength. Deriving instruction from such a source, and seeking it with such diligence, he was comforted in all his trials, and prepared for every duty'.<sup>47</sup> In his assessment, Carus points to something which is common to the testimonies of many other great Christian leaders down the ages, such as the Wesleys, Whitefield, and Augustine. In each case their devotional life is most notable.

We shall now consider in more detail Simeon's relationships with others and the influence of these people upon Simeon.

Writers such as Alec Vidler and particularly Ford K Brown have written negatively about Simeon. Vidler, for instance, has said that Simeon 'despite his being a Fellow of King's, seems to have been something of a bore'.<sup>48</sup> Though this does seem an odd thing to say about a man who attracted so much controversy and whose manner was described as extraordinary, it is necessary to consider such critical comment. It is in Simeon's relationships with others, especially with John Venn, that things

45 MS Ridley Hall Cambridge

46 Carus p 66

47 Carus p 59

48 Alec R Vidler *The Church in an Age of Revolution* (London: Pelican 1961) p 30

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appear which might justify criticism. We shall see if this is so.

Ford K Brown's comments about Simeon are quite biting:

It is simplest to say of Charles Simeon that he had all the superior Evangelical virtues, and all the superior Evangelical faults, in an exalted and unparalleled degree... In the most conspicuous way, Charles Simeon's very act was the product of an elevated, unintermittent and entirely acceptable righteousness that he was intensely and unintermittently aware of... Simeon was serenely superior to any suspicion that he could be wrong.<sup>49</sup>

These brief excerpts are from a work which is packed with negative comment about Simeon and his fellow Evangelicals.

Answers to some aspects of Brown's criticisms fall outside the scope of this study. But other of his comments are of a personal nature and it is perusal of personal relationships that will assist us in seeing how fair he is.

Simeon's acknowledged father figure was the Rev Henry Venn to whom he had been introduced by John Venn. As his memoirs recall, Henry Venn was '...a man of no ordinary character, his own (John Venn's) dear and honoured father. O what an acquisition is this! In this aged minister I found a father, an instructor...'.<sup>50</sup> Simeon also received encouragement and instruction from John Newton and John Thornton. There is a uniformly positive note in the letters of these men. But the relationship between Simeon and John Venn is less positive and is also very revealing.

In the case of John Newton, Simeon did not enter into close personal relationship, although they met occasionally at the Eclectic Society. His letter on Simeon's appointment was an encouragement, and may subsequently have seemed prophetically accurate. Newton, though having had 'but little personal intercourse' advises Simeon that he may rely on the Lord for all his needs; it is the Lord and not Simeon who has guided and called to this position. He continues:

...your sense of the Lord's great goodness, and the strong impression you have received of the power and reality of unseen things, have inspired you with a commendable zeal. Shall I commend you to reproof your zeal? Far from it! It would better become me to wish to catch fire from you, than to attempt to chill you by the cold maxims which often pass for guidance (17 11 1782).<sup>51</sup>

49 Ford K Brown *Fathers of the Victorians* (Cambridge: CUP 1961) pp 292-3

50 Carus p 22

51 MS Ridley Hall Cambridge

Such encouragement from a veteran Christian like Newton, which continued through subsequent correspondence, surely brought great assurance to Simeon. Encouragement was also forthcoming from John Thornton, but some words of his must have seemed ironically prophetic:

What I would recommend is to set off with only the usual service that has been performed as by that means I apprehend you'll gain upon the people gradually. You can at any time increase your duty as you see occasion. I should on the same principle advise you against exhorting from house to house as heretofore you did...<sup>52</sup>

Thornton's letter continues at length with warnings to personal spiritual care: 'Watch continually over your own spirit and do all in love, we must grow downwards in humility to soar heavenward'. This could have greatly encouraged Simeon in conscious striving after humility, and in the rightness of his chosen maxim, 'The servant of the Lord shall not strive'.

The correspondence shows that Simeon was encouraged in his general ministry, and in the spiritual aspects of the minister's life. However it is the relationship with the Venns that reveals and helps us to understand the paradoxical elements in Simeon.

We have noted that Simeon considered Henry Venn a father figure and, as such, he kept watch over Simeon, noting progress and change. We saw the first half of the following quotation earlier, in a letter from Henry Venn to a friend. The full quote notes an alteration in Simeon. 'This is a young man so vain of dress, that he constantly allowed more than £50 a year for his own person. Now he scruples keeping a horse, that the money may help the saints of Christ.'<sup>53</sup>

Letters from Henry Venn to Simeon and those to others in which he speaks of him are generally positive and observant of changes. The correspondence also shows that Simeon went often to Henry Venn for counsel, as Venn wrote to a Mr Riland on 23 January 1783: '...He comes over to advise with me upon every occasion'. Simeon was able to be completely open with Venn, as in his letter to him about Mr Riland's criticism of his sermon: 'When we got home, Mr Riland did not say one word in commendation of the sermon, but found fault with it on account of tautology, and want of richness in application'.<sup>54</sup> Such openness enabled him to be frank about personal failings and his need for improvement and self-examination.

52 Letter of 17 November 1782 MS Ridley Hall Cambridge

53 Carus p 28

54 Carus p 55

This openness enabled the older man to provide a base of fatherly encouragement for Simeon. It was a relationship so mutually edifying that Henry Venn was led to write of Simeon: 'Oh to flame as he does with zeal and yet be beautified with meekness!', and Simeon to say of Venn: 'I shall have reason to adore my God to all eternity for the benefit of his acquaintance'.<sup>55</sup>

In contrast, Simeon's relationship with John Venn reveals various factors, some of which led to him being opposed. Simeon loved John Venn; he called him 'the first spiritual acquaintance that I had in the world',<sup>56</sup> and '...a man after my own heart, a man for whom I have retained the most unfeigned love to his last moments...'.<sup>57</sup> Yet such feelings were not ultimately fully reciprocated. The relationship began with much ardour but by 1793, when Venn left Norfolk, it had cooled, and subsequently they saw each other but rarely.

The early intensity of feeling is typified by Simeon's writing on 23 September 1782: 'I used formerly to think that I had some idea of real friendship, but my acquaintance with you has convinced me that it is a very faint conception, rather of what it should be rather than what it is'.<sup>58</sup> Venn's letters exhibit similar warmth: 'My heart is often with you and you are remembered cordially by many friends here...I am yours in the best of all bonds'.<sup>59</sup>

Hennel writes that during the next three years Venn came to Cambridge to see Simeon once or twice each year, and once or twice a year Simeon went to Dunham, once for a whole week. They did not write often, though this did not concern them overmuch.<sup>60</sup> They exchanged sermons, family advice and tracts. Simeon asked Venn's approval of his edited version of Jenks' *Volume of Prayers*. Venn gave Simeon a colt as a gift, which Simeon accepted though not before some protestation.<sup>61</sup> It seems that all was well, yet it was not so. From the start Venn had been concerned at some aspects of Simeon's character. An extract from a letter of 25 May 1782: 'Our dear friend Simeon came over to see me very much improved

55 H Evan Hopkins *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1977) p 34

56 Carus p 368

57 Carus p 23

58 Carus p 29

59 Letter of J Venn to Simeon 10 April 1783 cited by M Hennel *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (London: Lutterworth 1977) p 91

60 '...be assured I do not weigh your love in so uncertain a balance (as constancy of correspondence) and I trust that you do not come in the least behind me in ardour.' Letter of Simeon to J Venn 29 September 1784 cited by Hennel p 92

61 These events are as detailed by Hennel pp 91-2.

and grown in grace; his very presence a blessing'.<sup>62</sup> This indicates the concerns he had felt.

The key to this cooling off is cited by Hennel as lying in 'the character of Simeon, and in John Venn's failure to understand that character'.<sup>63</sup>

Hennel goes on to show that John Venn did not understand the paradox within Simeon's nature of penitent humility and extravagant imperiousness. From the start, the best characteristics were there in developing form together with the worst. Venn saw the worst, that is 'an angular and overbearing personality, aggressive, prickly in his personal relationships, and lacking in sensitivity to others'.<sup>64</sup>

The underlying tensions emerge clearly from the correspondence. The shy and sensitive Venn<sup>65</sup> took Simeon to task about his temper in a letter of 10 April 1783, though he does not complain on being lashed by it.<sup>66</sup> Again the tension between Venn's sensitivity and Simeon's sharper edge comes to the fore in Simeon's letter to Venn of 22 September 1783:

My very dear Friend,

It is possible that I could write sarcastically to my friend Venn? That I did not intend it I am sure; and if I was so incautious as to pen anything which would bear such an interpretation, I will most willingly acknowledge myself (unwittingly indeed, but) very highly deserving of censure.<sup>67</sup>

It is unclear from the letter what issue gave rise to sarcasm. The most that is intimated is that Simeon had responded sarcastically to something Venn had written about whose turn it was to write. Hennel speculates that the real cause of friction here was Simeon's refusal to preach at Dunham for Venn but this is unsubstantiated. Several other letters indicate the tension between Venn's shyness and sensitivity, and the headstrong, passionate, penitent Simeon. For instance his letter to Venn, then the new Rector of Clapham, on 23 April 1794 reads:

62 Hennel points out that Carus incorrectly attributed this quotation to Venn's diary; the quotation is obviously from a letter. M Hennel *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (London: Lutterworth 1977) p 90 n3

63 Hennel p 88

64 Hennel p 88

65 Hennel p 31. Elsewhere, in a letter to John Thornton of 14 March 1781 Venn describes himself as 'extremely timid by constitution, unwilling to converse, and afraid of giving offence...' (cited by Hennel p 45).

66 Hennel p 93

67 Carus pp 55-6

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You will pardon readily the intimations which I suggested; they arose only from a deep-rooted attachment which my soul has ever felt towards you from the first day that we were introduced to each other, and which I hope and trust will continue not only unabated but with increasing fervour. Years have now evinced that I was not mistaken in the opinion which I had formed of you: on the contrary the Lord has so enabled you to make your light shine that I covet, exceedingly covet, a closer intimacy with you than ever. We are indeed cast somewhat in a different mould; and I am sensible that my complexion necessarily induces a conduct sometimes which needs forbearance, particularly from those whose natural dispositions do not altogether accord with mine... I now assure my friend that (DV) I will never more misconstrue his natural shyness into any declension of love towards me; I heartily beg his pardon that in his last visit to Cambridge I was in some measure guilty of it. But from henceforth adieu to such evil surmising for ever. If my dear brother will let me know when he comes next to Yelling I will fly over to meet him, and to enjoy sweet conversation with him.<sup>68</sup>

The relationship clearly reveals negative traits in Simeon. These could be misunderstood and would antagonize those unsympathetic to him. Henry Venn saw those traits too, but he also saw more deeply, beyond the vanities and excesses of youth, to the potential of a full and flowering maturity. Reading Ford Brown, it seems he has seen the negative side of Simeon but has not seen the side which Henry Venn saw. Both sides are clearly revealed if the evidence is read thoroughly.

The final factor to be considered in discussing personal aspects of Simeon's response to opposition is encapsulated in a quotation from Marcus Loane: 'It was the great glory of Charles Simeon that he combined local strength in Cambridge with an imperial outlook on the need of the world'.<sup>69</sup> He was enabled to deal graciously with opposition because he could look beyond to a 'broader' or 'greater' vision. This was present in five major strands, which can be demonstrated to be present from the earliest stages of Simeon's ministry:

### (i) The Purchase of Livings

W D Bald's recent doctoral thesis<sup>70</sup> draws together evidence that Simeon

68 M Hennel *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (London: Lutterworth 1977) p 94

69 M L Loane *Cambridge and the Evangelical Succession* (London: Lutterworth 1952) p 196. This seems to be an embellishment of C H Simkinson's comment in the earlier *Typical English Churchmen* (London 1902): 'It was the glory of Charles Simeon that he succeeded in combining local strength with imperial ideas' p 260.

70 W D Bald *Spheres of Influence, Simeon's Trust and its Implications for Evangelical Patronage* (Cambridge: Board of Graduate Studies 1981)



had a vision for this from the very beginning. As early as September 1782 he wrote to John Venn: 'I had been thinking this morning of the degeneracy of the clergy and whether the Lord would put it in my power to bear testimony against it'.<sup>71</sup> Bald notes that 'as early as his 23rd birthday he had glimpsed the scope of a lifelong passion, the establishment of "pious" and dedicated pastors within the C of E'.<sup>72</sup> He cites the position of Holy Trinity as providing a calculated and useful platform for his wide-ranging involvement. At this early stage of Simeon's ministry John Thornton was the major evangelical involved in presentations to livings.

Thornton is known from extant records to have made at least eight nominations during his lifetime. When he died in 1790 he left nine advowsons and one next presentation in trust to three trustees.<sup>73</sup> Simeon lacked wealth to attempt to emulate Thornton but curacies could be found and this is where his efforts were directed. The first was in 1785. He challenged one Thomas Jones in forthright fashion concerning a curacy at Creton which resulted in a ministry of forty-eight years.

## (ii) Missionary Societies

By the end of 1787 reports of Simeon's labours and zeal had evidently carried as far as India. 'Henceforth his thought and efforts would not be limited to Cambridge but be engaged in implementing a grand design for that nation's evangelisation.'<sup>74</sup> Carus goes on to describe how this project led to a more extensive one concerning education of missionaries and on 'the propriety and mode of attempting a mission to the heathen from the Established Church'. This in turn led to the formation of the Church Missionary Society.<sup>75</sup>

At the beginning of 1788 Simeon received an address from Calcutta; the Rev David Brown, in conjunction with a Mr Chambers, a Mr Grant and a Mr Udny, was keen to establish a mission there: 'From the enclosed papers you will learn the project of a mission to the East Indies. We understand such matters lie very near to your heart, and that you have a warm zeal to promote their interest. Upon this ground we take the liberty to invite you to become agent on behalf of the intended mission at home'.<sup>76</sup> On the front of the envelope Simeon wrote: 'It merely shews how early God enabled me to act for India...'.<sup>77</sup> The elements of concern for missionary outreach were there from early on.

71 CMS Archives quoted by Bald p 41

72 Bald p 41

73 Bald p 35

74 Carus p 75

75 Carus pp 75–80

76 Carus p 76

77 Carus p 76

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### (iii) Homiletical Instruction

Simeon started sermon classes for ordinands in 1790. In 1792 he abridged Claude's essay, published in 1796, for use in his class. There are reasonable grounds for assuming that this concern was present early on, if we allow that he thought over and planned these things well beforehand, and given his early concern for the importance of preaching.

### (iv) Clerical Societies

Hennel writes that 'these were a chief means by which Evangelical clergy, isolated and despised as dangerous enthusiasts by other clergy, "strengthened each other's hands for the work of the Lord" and made their parochial ministries much more effective'.<sup>78</sup> Meetings like those between Simeon and the Venns were among the forerunners of these Clerical Societies. Simeon became a staunch advocate of such societies which added strength to the evangelical movement.<sup>79</sup>

### (iv) Influence in the University

That this was part of his broader vision can be gathered from the time when he first expressed his desire for the living of Holy Trinity: '...that I might preach his Gospel there, and be a herald for him in the midst of the University'. It was a desire which grew until, as Simpkinson writes: 'He was beset with a most inspiring desire to free the University from its chains'.<sup>80</sup>

In conclusion Simeon came to a church which, from the evidence about the history of the lectureship, seems to have lost the evangelical fire it had once known. But the commonly held view that his gospel preaching was the initial cause of opposition seems wrong. His preaching may well have caused subsequent upset but unless his reputation had preceded him it could not have been the initial cause.

The evidence clearly suggests that the parishioners had a right to be upset. The bishop had foisted upon them a young inexperienced youthful curate, instead of John Hammond, the man they loved. Withholding the lectureship was the only way they could protest and be noticed. It would also support their man. Neither Simeon nor the bishop gain much credit from this initial episode. Simeon seems presumptuous, high-handed and

78 M Hennel *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (London: Lutterworth 1977) p 84

79 '...it is scarcely possible to find an account of an inaugural meeting of such without discovering there was at least one visitor present, and his name Chas Simeon': Hennel p 85

80 C H Simpkinson *Typical English Churchmen* (London: 1902) p 264

imperious in completely ignoring the parishioners' wishes. It is hard not to feel sympathy for them.

It is difficult to sympathize with Simeon at this point, but his offer to withdraw does seem gracious. He felt vindicated by the bishop's action. But was it gracious or was it a desperate ploy by a young man who realized he was in deep water? The answer, based on letters alone, is inconclusive. But as Simeon's sincerity and concern for his flock is consistent throughout the evidence, we may reasonably conclude that his offer to withdraw was sincere.

That the opposition should continue is not surprising. Simeon's extraordinary manner would have provoked the prevailing prejudice; the anger about the appointment would not go away, particularly with Hammond still actively involved in the church's life. But the evidence shows that Simeon was aware of his failings and willing to hear and learn from criticism. Meanwhile his manner of preaching and probably the rest of his ministerial style developed and grew.

As time went on and the expression of his zeal was tempered, it is likely that the qualities which had attracted crowds to St Edmund's and to the evening lectures came to the fore and his popularity began to grow. But even in the early stages he had some success. Those short-lived evening lectures attracted many and evidence shows that a normal public ministry was maintained. He was not just thick-skinned and wasting his time. All the characteristics described, especially the sense of separateness, helped during this period of prolonged opposition. It would not be true to say he was not hurt: 'I should have sunk under my burdens' and 'a sense of the injury done to my ministry'. There is however consistent evidence of his concern to put others first in his public ministry.

The graciousness of his response is emphasized by the fact that when he knew he had the law on his side he did not even inform his opponents of his findings but stayed faithful to his dictum: 'the servant of the Lord must not strive'.

On a personal level, too, he was well aware of his failings. He knew he was difficult, but he was constantly encouraged by his friends who also gently guided him especially Henry Venn.<sup>81</sup>

The graciousness noted by various biographers is backed up by repeated evidence, but I suggest a close reading enables us to sympathize with and understand better those who opposed him. Above all, however unusual

81 M Hennel *John Venn and the Clapham Sect* (London: Lutterworth 1977) p 93

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such graciousness may seem to us, it is the sheer consistency of the evidence which convinces. Graciousness is there from start to finish.

The paradox of Simeon is clear from his relationship with John Venn. If one so close to Simeon did not understand him then it is comprehensible why a modern writer like Ford Brown should not do so. If those negative characteristics which upset John Venn were the sum of Simeon's character then negative views such as Ford Brown's would be justified. However, qualities such as humility and penitence emerge clearly in numerous letters. The same Simeon who was called pompous and imperious also wrote of '...the three things a minister has to learn, (1) Humility, (2) Humility, (3) Humility',<sup>82</sup> The whole man must be taken into account if one is to form a balanced view.

It is essential to look beyond the obvious in order to understand Simeon and his response. He himself was concerned lest he would be misunderstood in later years. There are several instances of this in his writings: the following marginal comment to notes about publication of his own words is typical: 'My object I have explained in a letter to ... nb that letter is important if ever my conduct be thought to savour of vanity'.<sup>83</sup>

Ten, twenty, thirty years and more from when he went first to Holy Trinity, the paradoxical Simeon is there, revealed clearly in the various evidence. Grace, humility and submission consistently abound. The gracious response so widely recorded stands vindicated.

Simeon had his eye fixed on a greater vision. It was there from the start and he had the determination to go with it. This above all appears to have helped him through, enabling him to look beyond immediate trials. In the end, his first expressed wish 'to be a herald' in the University was fulfilled on an even bigger scale. Today, both the Church of England and the church worldwide continue to benefit from his insight and initiatives.

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82 From a 1787 letter to John Thornton widely quoted by biographers including Carus p 74

83 MS Letter Cambridge University Library