

Charles Spurgeon: The Prince and the Paupers

Robyn Carswell

Charles H. Spurgeon was one of the most admired preachers in Britain during the nineteenth century as well as one of the most popular. On many Sundays, crowds that numbered over ten thousand attended his sermons. However, Spurgeon was not without his critics. The press, Anglican ministers, and even members of his own denomination took many opportunities to disparage the young Baptist minister. They thought his technique and style were vulgar and base, and antithetical to proper worship and religious decorum. Despite his detractors and their frequent and malicious attacks, Spurgeon's success escalated. When the Anglican clergy realized they could not compete with his widespread success, they began to attack him on a theological and spiritual level, questioning biblical knowledge as well as his sincerity as a Christian. Not only was Spurgeon a frequent object of scorn and criticism, he also had to deal with societal backlash: the fear and jealousy of the religious elite toward a minister whose popularity and influence outstripped their own. Historians have centered their focus on Spurgeon's career, his life, or his ministerial efforts outside the pulpit. Previous scholarly works have been either biographic in nature or dealt solely with the major doctrinal controversies that occurred during the course of his ministry. What these historians have neglected to do is examine the factors that prompted attacks from the Anglican clergy, the press, and at times his own fellow Baptist ministers. This essay will address those issues and demonstrate that Spurgeon's critics were alarmed at the success of a young, untrained minister whose homespun methods reflected an undercurrent of change in the Victorian era.

In the Victorian era, the Church of England was an intricate hierarchy of governance, having derived its origins from the Roman Catholic Church. Due to its role as the official state church, it enjoyed a unique influence over English society. The church maintained its own court system and was the final authority on wills,

marriages and divorces.¹ The head of the church was the archbishop of Canterbury, who along with the archbishop of York occupied two of the twenty-four Parliamentary seats reserved for Bishops in the House of Lords.

Archbishops, bishops, priests and deacons were part of the ordained clergy of the church and were required to follow a set of strict guidelines that were contained in a rubric outlined in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP). The BCP detailed the many church doctrines, from order of service to the requirements and beliefs to which the ordained were to adhere.² Within the BCP were the Thirty-nine Articles, which contained a list of requirements for clergy. The Church would only accept candidates for ordination that completed a university degree, outlined and referred to in the Articles as a "Faculty."³ The Anglican clergy was not only university educated, but often times, they attended the finest schools in Britain. Cambridge and Oxford turned out more theology graduates than all other disciplines combined. For many years, a large number of graduates from both institutions became Church of England clergy. According to one source, even as late as 1851, eighteen of the nineteen heads of colleges at Oxford were clergymen, while 349 of the 542 fellows and 215 undergrads were also ordained into the ministry.⁴

Anglican clergy also held an esteemed place in British society. Bishops were afforded the title "My Lord", held seats in the House of Lords, the upper chamber of the British Parliament, and referred to their primary residences as "palaces".⁵ Priests, who were the local church officials, were also entitled to several benefits. Their role was to conduct services, officiate over baptisms, weddings etc. and in lieu of a regular salary they were entitled to all or part of the parish tithes

¹ Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 112-113.

² *Ibid.*, 113.

³ The Church of England, "The Form and Manner of Making, Ordaining, and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, According to the Order of the Church of England," *The Book of Common Prayer and the Administration of the Sacraments, and other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Use of The Church of England: Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, Pointed as they are to be Sung or Said in Churches.* (n.p. accessed 6 November 2004); available from <http://www.vulcanhammer.org/anglican/bcp-1662.php>; Internet.

⁴ Pool, 123.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

which afforded many priests with quite a handsome lifestyle.⁶ This position of status and influence was not available to their priestly counterparts of the other churches in England.

The segregation of attendance between the Anglican Church and the other churches (known collectively as the dissenters) was almost strictly across class lines. The wealthy upper classes and the politically powerful were members of the Anglican Church and were largely behind its funding. In gratitude for their large donations, many cathedrals contained reserved pews for its members, which were available only to them or their families.⁷ Middle or lower class worshippers often were limited to standing or floor-sitting. In addition to the embarrassment of sitting in the back or on the floor, wearing one's "Sunday best" further separated the classes. The middle and lower classes had sacrificed this luxury for things more vital to daily living.⁸ In contrast, the dissenting churches practiced a simple, more colloquial style of worship. The ministers were more plainspoken and talked on a level their congregations could understand.⁹ The middle and lower classes felt naturally drawn to a denomination that accepted them without the adornment of the more genteel.

It is also important to understand that in the nineteenth century, the Victorian elite considered attending services, other than at one's own church, entertainment. Without the pastimes that would become available to the twentieth century world, the Victorians would seek entertainment wherever they could find it. Many of the Victorian elite¹⁰ took the Sabbath quite seriously, putting away all toys, games and secular books.¹¹ Without other diversions, attending additional worship services would have been quite appealing. In addition to attending the two and sometimes three sermons preached at their own churches, worshippers would engage in what some have referred to as "sermon-tasting". This act of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jimmy Yi, "The Religious Climate of Victorian England" (accessed 6 November 2004); available from <http://www.gober.net/victorian/reports/religion.html>; Internet; accessed 6 November 2004.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Those who were church attendees: the wealthy, the aristocracy, nobles, landed gentry, etc. The working classes often times were unable to attend Sunday worship.

¹¹ L.E. Elliott-Binns, *Religion in the Victorian Era* (Greenwich: Seabury Press, 1953), 416.

trying on sermons, churches and pastors gave the upper class the opportunity to see how the "other-half" was worshipping. Much to the vexation of the Anglican ministers, many of their elite members would not return to their reserved pews.

It was this England of Anglican aristocracy and class divisions into which Charles Spurgeon was born. In 1834, in a lower-middle class cottage in rural England, Charles Spurgeon became the first of seventeen children born to John and Eliza Spurgeon. His father was a part-time Congregationalist minister and clerk in a local coal yard, but it was his grandfather that first introduced the young Charles to the ministry. Before Charles reached his first birthday, the family moved to Colchester. However, due to unknown circumstances,¹² the parents of baby Charles sent him to live with his grandparents in Stambourne. He lived with his grandparents until he was seven years old and was deeply devoted to his grandfather, who had been a preacher and instructed him often in biblical truths.¹³ After he returned to Colchester, he visited his grandparents for summers where he furthered his knowledge of the Bible and church doctrine.

It was during one of these summer visits that a family friend gave an interesting prophecy. Spurgeon was ten years old and had become a very inquisitive youth, asking his grandfather many thought-provoking questions about Scripture. On one such occasion, the Rev. Richard Knill¹⁴ was visiting Spurgeon's grandparents, when young Charles began to plead with the man to discuss biblical matters. The reverend relented and over the course of his visit the two became inseparable. Upon leaving, the reverend called the family together, pulled the youth onto his knee, and said, "I do not know how it is, but I feel a solemn presentiment that this child will preach the gospel to thousands, and God will bless him to many souls. So sure am I of this, that when my little man preaches in Rowland Hill's chapel, as he will do one day, I should like him to promise me that he will give out the hymn commencing, - 'God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.'" Spurgeon

¹² Ernest W. Bacon, *Spurgeon, Heir of the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1967; Baker Book House, 1982), 12. The author notes that this may have been due to bad housing.

¹³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴ An apparently well-known dissenting minister of the time, although little is known about him today.

made the promise and when he preached in Mr. Hill's pulpit at Wootton-under-Edge, the hymn was sung and the promise kept.¹⁵

Spurgeon thought that Rev. Knill's words had a self-fulfilling quality; he had believed them and yearned for the day that he might be able to keep his promise. However, he strongly believed that no person should dare preach the word of God unless he had converted, but at that point in his life he was convinced he was unworthy of the honor. When discussing his view of himself prior to conversion he was quoted as saying "I lived a miserable creature, finding no hope, no comfort, thinking surely God would never save me."¹⁶ At a small chapel on a side street in Colchester, Charles Spurgeon stated he found what he was searching for. There, at a primitive Methodist Church, a fifteen-year-old Spurgeon was converted. According to Spurgeon, that day was the happiest of his life, saying, "I thought I could dance all the way home."¹⁷

Following his conversion, he enrolled in a local school, where he served as an usher¹⁸ and taught Sunday school to the younger pupils. The school and its associated church were Baptist. Spurgeon had already decided upon a Baptist future prior to his conversion, partly due to his study of the New Testament. He believed that the act of Baptism, although not required for salvation, was in fact fundamental following conversion.¹⁹ At the school Spurgeon so impressed the faculty and staff during his many theological debates that they admitted him to the "Lay Preachers' Association" despite his young age. His first opportunity to address a congregation occurred shortly thereafter. The association asked him to go to the village of Taversham (a four-mile walk) to accompany a young man who Spurgeon had assumed was the preacher for the service. On the way, Spurgeon expressed to him that he was sure God would bless him in his efforts. The man told Spurgeon that he was not the preacher and in fact had never preached and was only supposed to walk with Spurgeon. Spurgeon arrived to find the congregation assembled and without another qualified minister to deliver the

¹⁵ Geo. C. Needham, ed., *The Life and Labors of Charles H. Spurgeon* (Cambridge: University Press: John Wilson and Son, 1881), 31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷ Bacon, *Spurgeon, Heir of the Puritans*, 24.

¹⁸ Not the traditional church usher we think of today, but rather a student teacher.

¹⁹ William Young Fullerton, *C.H. Spurgeon: A Biography* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1920), transcribed by Dan Carlson; available from <http://www.spurgeon.org/misc/biopref.htm>; Internet; accessed 25 March 2005.

message, he took the pulpit and at sixteen delivered his first public sermon.

He then spent the next three years at a school in Cambridge where he was a ministerial assistant and preached intermittently at local churches. He had already become quite popular and had been receiving invitations to preach special sermons, even some at a considerable distance. It is worthy to note that Cambridge was the Puritan intellectual center: Emmanuel College (known at the time as "The Puritan College") was located there and many famous Puritan Evangelicals attended. This proximity to such a learned institution would no doubt have had a positive effect on the young Spurgeon. Spurgeon did not stay in Cambridge long however. In 1854, he began his professional career when New Park Street Baptist Church called him to London.

New Park Street Baptist Church had been looking for a pastor for over three months and although several candidates had come to the pulpit, none had been asked to preach for a second time. The church was large as well as historic (over 200 years old), and boasted a seating capacity of over 1,200. It had great preachers in its history, but in the years before Spurgeon's arrival the pastors had lacked the abilities to maintain a large congregation and by 1854 the membership was only about 200. Another contributing factor to its low enrollment was its location - a repellent area of London, which was often river-flooded. Direct access to the Church was via the Southwark Bridge, which charged a toll.

Spurgeon arrived at New Park Street to preach his first sermon on Sunday December 18th to a congregation of eighty persons. The parishioners were so impressed that they called upon their family, friends and neighbors and urged them to attend the evening service. His sermons was so powerful and moving, the deacons resolved themselves to instill him as pastor no matter the cost. Their only complaint was his gesticulation of a blue handkerchief with white spots, which was apparently a mannerism to which they were not accustomed. The congregation handled the situation delicately by a gift of a dozen white handkerchiefs.²⁰ New Park Street Baptist immediately offered Spurgeon the pastorate, although he insisted upon a three-month probationary period, saying he wanted to ensure a beneficial relationship between himself and the church and said he did not wish "to be a hindrance if I cannot be a help."²¹ Without

²⁰ Bacon, *Spurgeon, Heir of the Puritans*, 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

waiting for the three months to conclude, the deacons met and passed a resolution requesting a waiver of the probation period and Spurgeon retained as the permanent pastor, Spurgeon agreed and asked for their prayers of support. This union lasted for over thirty-eight years, until Spurgeon's death in 1892.

Charles Spurgeon was a runaway success from the very beginning, largely due to his technique. He was often spoken of as the "People's Pastor" and frequently used plain language and a conversational style, making him the complete antithesis of the more staid Anglican priests. Spurgeon's method of delivery was simple and direct; he used illustrative sermons and gave his listeners one simple choice, heaven or hell. One of his earliest sermons at New Park Street Baptist Church illustrates this description quite effectively,

Since last we met together, probably some have gone to their long last home; and ere we meet again in this sanctuary, some here will be amongst the glorified above, or amongst the damned below. Which will it be? Let you soul answer. If to-night you fell down dead in your pews, or where you are standing in the gallery, where would you be? in *heaven* or in *hell*? Ah! deceive not yourselves; let conscience have its perfect work; and if in the sight of God, you are obliged to say, "I tremble and fear lest my portion should be with unbelievers," listen one moment, and then I have done with thee. "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned."²²

An attendant to one of his earliest sermons describes him as follows, "His voice is clear and musical; his language plain; his style flowing, but terse; his method lucid and orderly; his matter sound and suitable; his tone and spirit cordial; his remarks always pithy and pungent, sometimes familiar and colloquial, yet never light or coarse, much less profane."²³

Another attendant was also captivated with the new preacher. Miss Susannah Thompson was among the congregation on the first occasion of his ministry at New Park Street Baptist. Although she was not particularly impressed with the young preacher, evidently something drew her to him. Within a few months, they were spending quite a bit of time together and the following year he

²² C.H. Spurgeon, "The Comforter" (delivered at New Park Street Baptist Church in London on 21 January 1855), available from <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0005.htm>; Internet; accessed 26 March 2005.

²³ Needham, *The Life and Labors of Charles H. Spurgeon*, 58.

proposed. They were married on January 8, 1856. In September of the same year, the couple welcomed a set of twins, Charles and Thomas. Spurgeon's wife was extraordinary in her support of her husband and his ministry and Charles adored her for it. He expressed his love and devotion in a letter written to his wife in 1889: "You are as an angel of God to me...Bravest of women, strong in the faith, you have ministered unto me...God bless thee out of the Seventh Heaven!"²⁴

Just as Spurgeon's family had so quickly doubled, so did the growth of his ministry. As word of Spurgeon's power as a preacher spread, the growth of the church was nearly exponential. People had come to hear Spurgeon solely due to word of mouth. Unlike the evangelists of today, there were no billboards with Spurgeon's likeness splashed across them, no television ads or media craze. The crowds came in throngs and within one year the church enlarged the Chapel, with a new seating capacity of 1,500, but even that eventually proved inadequate. By 1856, a mere two years after the start of his ministry, it was decided a new building was needed to accommodate the ever-expanded congregation. The church started a fund for a building later known as The Metropolitan Tabernacle, but during construction an alternate meeting place was required. They decided that the interim meeting place would be Surrey Music Hall, a building capable of holding 12,000 people. Many of the members of New Park Street Baptist voiced concerns about the building. Some were of the opinion that it was improper to hold church services in a place of worldly amusement. Others were concerned the building would be too large. The morning of the first service discounted the latter view. Surrey Music Hall was completely full and an estimated 10,000 people waited outside.²⁵

Spurgeon's popularity drew larger crowds, but it also drew contempt and mockery by Anglican ministers. Bishop Wilberforce was perhaps one of the most vicious toward Spurgeon. When asked if he was jealous of Spurgeon's popularity, he replied, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's ass."²⁶ Although the Bishop's attack was

²⁴ Bacon, *Spurgeon, Heir of the Puritans*, 46.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁶ William Young Fullerton, *C.H. Spurgeon: A Biography* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1920), 125; quoted in Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1992), 254; quoted in Robert H. Ellison *The Victorian Pulpit, Spoken and Written Sermons in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1998), 73.

undoubtedly blunt and demeaning, it was not the first, nor the last. Many of the ministers within Spurgeon's own denomination were equally as cruel. A fellow Baptist minister, Rev. Sutton of Cottenham once referred to Spurgeon as the "sauciest dog that ever barked in a pulpit."²⁷

Neither Spurgeon's pastoral peers nor the press could understand how a man, without University preparation and born of lower-middle class stock could be such a raging success in the pulpit. An inordinate number of journalists made much ado of his success, which in their opinion, would be fleeting. Across the Atlantic, A.P. Peabody of the *North American Review* was one of the few writers who did not attack Spurgeon's success outright. In the January 1858 edition he wrote, "His acquaintance with the Bible is surprising; and we have often, when reading his works, said, 'Whence hath this man this knowledge?'"²⁸ An unnamed author writing for *Fraser's Magazine* did not possess the same reserve asking, "by what means a youth of twenty-two years of age, of scanty educations, with a bold and brassy style of speech...has attracted congregations exceeding, we believe by the thousands, the largest known in the present century."²⁹ Spurgeon was unflappable. His goal was not to be popular, but to save souls. In the same article, Spurgeon was quoted as saying "we have most certainly departed from the usual mode of preaching, but we do not feel bound to offer even half a word of apology for so doing, since we believe ourselves free to use any manner of speech calculated to impress."³⁰ Spurgeon however, in a sense had drawn the first blood by preaching an uplifting message to the poor and lower classes; that they were not the rabble they had been told they were, but sons and daughters of the King of Heaven, to whom pedigrees and lineage mattered not. In a sermon delivered during his first month as minister at New Park Street Baptist, Spurgeon explains the Heavenly Royalty afforded to all believers regardless of station in the present life.

²⁷ C.H. Spurgeon, *C.H. Spurgeon Autobiography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), 1:272; quoted in Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel publications, 1992), 177; quoted in Robert Ellison *The Victorian Pulpit, Spoken and Written Sermons in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1998), 73.

²⁸ A.P. Peabody, "Spurgeon," *North American Review* 86 (1858): 276.

²⁹ "Sermons and Sermonizers," *Fraser's Magazine* 55 (January 1857): 84-85.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85. He uses 'we' here to include his deacons and church members in order to illustrate the unity behind his style.

What a fuss some people make about their grand fathers and grandmothers, and distant ancestors...[a] pedigree in which shall be found dukes, marquises, and kings, and princes. Oh! what would some give for such a pedigree? I believe, however, that it is not what our ancestors were, but what we are, that will make us shine before God... But since some men will glory in their descent, I will glory that the saints have the proudest ancestry in all the world. Talk of Caesars, or of Alexanders, or tell me even of our own good Queen: I say that I am of as high descent as her majesty, or the proudest monarch in the world.³¹

Sermons of this nature were common from Spurgeon's pulpit and fell on eager ears. However, Spurgeon's critics were unrelenting in their ridicule of his lack of theological training, a hallmark of the upper class and the established clergy. This charge of his lack of education was true only in that Spurgeon did not attend a seminary. Spurgeon's family was strict Calvinists as well as ministers and as a result, Spurgeon grew up entrenched in the gospel. He had planned on a college education and had arranged to meet with Dr. Angus, the tutor of Regent's Park College at the home of a local businessman to discuss possible University admittance. Unfortunately, the maid botched the appointment and did not inform the tutor of Spurgeon's arrival. After a time the doctor left to return to London. After leaving the house, feeling not a little disappointed, Spurgeon stated he heard a voice say to him "Seekest thou great things for thyself, seek them not!" Spurgeon stated at that point he knew God had intended for him to begin his ministry immediately and forgo collegiate instruction even though he was convinced that this would lead to a life of "obscurity and poverty."³² Based on this assertion, one could assume that Spurgeon was convinced his ensuing success had been a blessing directly from God. He never regretted his decision and when offered honorary titles he always refused, once saying, "I had rather receive the title of S.S.T. [Sunday School Teacher] than M.A., B.A., or any other honour that ever was conferred by men."³³

³¹ C.H. Spurgeon, "The Kingly Priesthood of Saints" (delivered at New Park Street Baptist Church in London on 28 January 1855), available from <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0010.htm>; Internet; accessed 26 March 2005.

³² Needham, *The Life and Labors of Charles H. Spurgeon*, 46.

³³ Carl F.H. Henry, foreword to Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers, by Lewis Drummond (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1992); quoted in Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel

The press and the Anglican clergy were not interested in Spurgeon's personal revelations. They were perplexed and offended at the reality that an upstart, lower class, "boy preacher"³⁴ could command such respect and fame, some of which was now coming from the upper class. In order to curtail the exodus of their wealthy congregations the ministers, largely through the influence of the press, devalued Spurgeon's congregation as well. They categorized Spurgeon's flock as common and simple. The January 1857 edition of *Fraser's Magazine* grudgingly conceded that Spurgeon had "leaped to the very pinnacle of popularity" adding for clarity, "among the lower classes."³⁵

The belittling of Spurgeon's congregation by some historians has unfortunately survived the years. Horton Davies, a Princeton Historian, initially compared Spurgeon's style to the successful Anglican priest George Whitefield, but later argued that while Whitefield was successful with rich and poor alike, Spurgeon's success was limited to the lower middle class and artisans.³⁶ In fact, Spurgeon's success was with the privileged as well as the penniless. The list of the attendants to his sermons reads like a list of England's Who's Who, it included "Lord Chief Justice Campbell, the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs of London, Earl Russell, Lord Alfred Paget, Lord Manmure, Earl Grey, the Earl of Shaftesbury, the Marquis of Westminster, Lord Carlise, the Earl of Elgin, Baron Bramwell, Lady Rothschild and Miss Florence Nightingale."³⁷

While one could argue that although most early dissenters had indeed preached to a congregation who were not representative of the wealthy upper class, this was evidently not the case with Spurgeon. Peabody again, in the *North American Review*, writes that many Sundays the audiences were too large for even the largest gathering rooms, "embracing persons of all ranks, of every degree of culture, and of all varieties of sentiments, and has never failed to rivet their attention."³⁸ This ability to captivate a congregation was

Publication, 1992); quoted in Robert H. Ellison, *The Victorian Pulpit, Spoken and Written Sermons in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1998), 61.

³⁴ Bacon, *Spurgeon, Heir of the Puritans*, 50.

³⁵ "Sermons and Sermonizers," 84.

³⁶ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*. Vol. 4, *From Newman to Martineau, 1690-1900*. Princeton University Press, 1961-1962; Combined Edition, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 335-336.

³⁷ Bacon, *Spurgeon, Heir of the Puritans*, 56.

³⁸ Peabody, "Spurgeon," 276.

unique to Spurgeon, but his success was beginning to increase anxiety that was already present within the Establishment.

While the Anglican clergy mainly focused their attention on Spurgeon, they were really using him as a scapegoat for a much larger problem. The Anglicans had been instructed in theology, foreign languages, mathematics, science and the humanities, but even with those tools, abilities and talents in their possession their congregations, wealthy and powerful, were dwindling and being drawn in by the dissenters, most notably Spurgeon.

The ecumenical census of 1851 made this fact well known among the Anglican clergy. The census was taken across the whole of England and Wales with a stated purpose to discover "how far the means of Religious Instruction provided in Great Britain during the last fifty years have kept pace with the population during the same period."³⁹ The results of the census were, in essence, to determine the number of church buildings (as well as the time of their construction) and the number of persons attending them. The Anglican clergy attacked the proposal even before it was on paper.⁴⁰ After the returns were published, the clergy, Anglican and dissenters alike, used them as fuel. The Anglican distrust of the dissenters worsened when the reports "showed an unexpected degree of support for them."⁴¹ The Anglicans justified the surprising results by declaring the non-conformists had made a concerted effort to draw people on the Sunday of the census, although the newspapers for the preceding weeks did not evidence any such conspiracy.⁴² Many of the Anglicans even spoke publicly concerning the results. The Rector of Morcott wrote a letter which stated, "I would suggest that many of the Dissenting statistics should be received with great caution for I can [believe?] their determination to make every effort to swell their numbers: and it should invariably be remembered that comparatively few of those who attended their chapels are *bona fide* Dissenters, the numbers of those whom they call Church Members

³⁹ Frances Coakley, ed. "General Background to 1851 Religious Census," *A Manx Note Book: An Electronic Compendium of Matters Past and Present Connected with the Isle of Man*, available from <http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/methodism/rc1851/index.htm>; Internet; accessed 30 January 2005.

⁴⁰ David M. Thompson, "The 1851 Religious Census: Problems and Possibilities," *Victorian Studies* 1967 11 (September 1967): 87.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 95.

being very small.”⁴³ The statement by the rector is important because the Anglican clergy wanted to include persons who were members of the Church of England even if they were attending at a Dissenting church.⁴⁴ When these contentions did not obtain their desired results, which was most likely a complete scrapping of the data collected from the census, the Anglicans decided on a different approach. Bishop Ely was convinced his numbers were low due to the inclement weather, “it was a very rainy day, and the congregation which ordinarily numbered between 400 and 500 did not consist of more than 60. But as it was a large parish, it was dotted over with Dissenting chapels, and *accordingly* people went there.”⁴⁵

The press also had their opinion concerning the census results and offered this explanation: “taken as a whole, the preaching of the English clergy is not so attractive or so effective as it might and ought to be.”⁴⁶ The Church of England responded to its declining membership by building more churches and increasing educational demands for its clergy.⁴⁷ To judge from Spurgeon’s success, the endeavor missed the point entirely.

Rather than admitting a need to update the Anglican sermons, the press and others decided to continue their harassment of Spurgeon. One of the most malicious attacks concerned the one singular event that had the ability to unnerve the preacher. The incident occurred during building of the Metropolitan Tabernacle while services continued at Surrey Music Hall. The year was 1856 and Spurgeon’s popularity was greater than ever. As already stated, 12,000 people filled the hall. Within moments of beginning the services, there was a commotion. Someone shouted “FIRE! The galleries are giving way, the place is falling!” In a panic, the crowd swarmed to evacuate and caused the balustrades to break, along with many staircases. Seven persons perished in the mêlée and another twenty-eight were seriously injured. Spurgeon was so undone that

⁴³ Home Office Papers (H.O.) 129: 440-4; quoted in Thompson, “The 1851 Religious Census: Problems and Possibilities,” 95.

⁴⁴ Thompson, “The 1851 Religious Census: Problems and Possibilities,” 95.

⁴⁵ *The Times* (London), 7 July 1870, (italics are Thompson’s), quoted in Thompson, “The 1851 Religious Census: Problems and Possibilities,” *Victorian Studies* 1967 11 (September 1967): 96.

⁴⁶ “Sermons and Sermonizers,” 84.

⁴⁷ Jimmy Yi, “The Religious Climate of Victorian England”; available from <http://www.gober.net/victorian/reports/religion.html>; Internet; accessed 6 November 2004.

his associates had to carry him from the pulpit. Although the instigator or purpose behind the “fire incident” was never identified, the press was nonetheless merciless and seized upon the opportunity. They blamed Spurgeon and asserted that he should be run out of town on a rail. The following appeared in the *Saturday Review* within days of the incident:

Mr. Spurgeon’s doings are, we believe, entirely discountenanced by his co-religionists. There is scarcely a Dissenting minister of any note who associates with him...This hiring of places of public amusement for Sunday preaching is a novelty, and a painful one. It looks as if religion were at its last shift. After all, Mr. Spurgeon only affects to be the Sunday Jullien...but the old thing reappears when popular preachers hire concert-rooms, and preach Particular Redemption in saloons reeking with the perfume of tobacco, and yet echoing with the chaste melodies of Bobbing Around and the valse from Travita...⁴⁸

The Saturday Review formulated a panacea for this event and the prevention of others like it. In their opinion, society should “place in the hand of every thinking man a whip [with which] to scourge from society the authors of such vile blasphemies as on Sunday night, above the cries of the dead and dying, and louder than the wails of misery from the maimed and suffering, resounded from the mouth of Mr. Spurgeon in the Music Hall of the Surrey Gardens.”⁴⁹ The unpleasant incident along with the assault by the press caused Spurgeon to fall into a deep depression. In time, he was able to recover but rarely discussed the tragedy again. Eventually the scandal died away as did the *Saturday Review*. The Tabernacle was finally completed and worship began in March of 1861. Ironically, the notoriety of the tragic event at the Surrey Music Hall transformed Spurgeon from a local phenomenon into an international persona. Travelers from America to England upon their return were asked, ““Did you see the Queen” and next, “Did you hear Spurgeon?””⁵⁰

Despite the demands of preaching, sometimes four times a week, Spurgeon was able to have a very productive ministry outside of the pulpit. He established the Pastor’s College, an institution for young men who were unable to attend other Baptist colleges, either

⁴⁸ Iain H. Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 29.

⁴⁹ Bacon, *Spurgeon, Heir of the Puritans*, 54-55.

⁵⁰ Peabody, “Spurgeon,” 275.

for financial reasons or because they lacked the appropriate educational pre-qualifications. The only criteria placed upon them was that they were to have been soundly converted and been preaching for two years. In Spurgeon's opinion, he did not want to create new ministers he wanted to "help those already called."⁵¹ In 1867, through a large donation, he was able to erect the Stockwell Orphanage. These two projects began a list of auxiliary organizations of the Metropolitan Tabernacle that would make most ministries today pale in comparison. Spurgeon somehow found the energy to be involved at some level with them all. These affiliations, his sermons and his congregation would be enough to make the most organized preachers' head swim. Nevertheless, Spurgeon's commitment to spreading the gospel was not complete.

Spurgeon wanted a way to communicate his ideas to his correspondents, his friends and his associates. Out of this need he created *The Sword and the Trowel*, a magazine filled with expositions by Spurgeon and others. The magazine was also a means to inform the readers of the progress of the causes he held close to his heart. For those people who were more comfortable with plain-talk he created *John Plowman's Talk*, and its sequel *John Plowman's Pictures*.⁵² Both books were immensely popular. Spurgeon went on to write numerous other books and articles, but perhaps his greatest literary achievement would be the seven-volume set of *The Treasury of David*. Contained within the volumes are Spurgeon's exhaustive commentaries on the Psalms. He commented on every verse as well as citing the comments of others. He toiled at the volumes for no less than twenty years, contributing to it in his spare time.⁵³ Through his writings, multitudes of people were able to 'hear' the words of Spurgeon. His extensive writings outside of the pulpit undoubtedly had a great impact on his popularity.

Late into the nineteenth century, it became abundantly clear that Spurgeon's success was permanent and life-long. Times had changed; the industrial revolution was in full swing and high society, in general, lessened its attachment to formality and looked more to secular pastimes, resisting the pressure of puritanical ideals.⁵⁴ The press reflected a similar tolerance and although it was still reluctant

⁵¹ Bacon, *Spurgeon, Heir of the Puritans*, 91.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 149.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ F.M.L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 260.

to endorse Spurgeon fully, it became less brutal. In December 1870, Spurgeon's caricature appeared in *Vanity Fair*. To appear in the magazine was considered quite an honor even though their articles were typically tongue-in-cheek and lampoonish. Despite this fact, the writer found a way to compliment the pastor saying he was "sound in his theology... [he has] a clear intellect, and a vivacity of diction but too rarely met with among popular preachers." The article ends with a tease for the Anglican Church, which suggested that Spurgeon be made Bishop of Southwark and St. Giles "if he would stoop to the office."⁵⁵ The mainstream press was also inclined to afford Spurgeon at least a margin of respect. An article that appeared in the July 1884 issue of *The Critic and Good Literature* describes this change as more a sign of the times than a testimony of Spurgeon's abilities.

It is not only that religious acrimony has decreased – though twenty years ago Bishops would not have asked after Mr. Spurgeon's health, or dignitaries of the Church have attended his sermons, and although this side of the change naturally strikes Mr. Spurgeon himself most forcibly...the disposition to ridicule or depreciate successes like his [has] entirely died away.⁵⁶

With the clarity of a century, one may well assume that today's historians could finally concede that Spurgeon was a great orator and spiritual leader without attributing his popularity to shock value or the needs of an earthy congregation, but this is not the case. Davies, while admitting that Spurgeon's sermon technique had an "orderly structure with sub-divisions that could easily be remembered"⁵⁷ and had "striking beginnings...and illustrations to hold the attention," he still chose to describe Spurgeon's exegeses as "capricious, idiosyncratic, and even grotesque."⁵⁸ While his style could certainly be considered unorthodox, one would be hard pressed to view it as capricious or grotesque. Davies did not cite any specific examples of quotes made by Spurgeon as support of his remarks, thus making it difficult to refute them.

⁵⁵ "Men of the Day No. 16," *Vanity Fair* (10 December 1870); available from <http://www.spurgeon.org/fls/wf.htm>; Internet; accessed 23 September 2004.

⁵⁶ "Mr. Spurgeon at Fifty," *The Critic and Good Literature* 5, no. 28 (12 July 1884): 21

⁵⁷ Davies, *From Newman to Martineau*, 337.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

From the outset of his ministry, Charles Spurgeon was novel, innovative and rather anarchic in his preaching. He lacked University training, he never served as an associate pastor and he was not a member of the Establishment. As a further conundrum, he was a complete and immediate success in the pulpit, preaching to crowds numbering in the thousands. The clergy as well as the press could not accept his unprecedented success and thus tried to degrade him in any way they could imagine. Attempts were made by the aforementioned to undermine his theological training, his upbringing, his age, his manner, and failing all of those, finally questioned his genuineness as a Christian. The Anglican Church was perhaps frightened, unable, or unwilling to adapt to the changing times and sat dumbfounded as great numbers of wealthy members flocked to a lower class, and in their opinion, feral venue to worship. The whole state of affairs flew in the face of Victorian standards. The Anglican clergy found themselves at an ecclesiastical crossroad trying to make sense of their crumbling world. Their members migrated in droves toward a message that left them feeling somehow better about themselves and the world in which they lived. Attendees at New Park Street Church increasingly felt they had been to something much greater than a mere public display of religious formalities.

Charles Spurgeon had what virtually every other preacher to his day had lacked: charisma. Perhaps more dramatic than Spurgeon's amazing success, however was the underlying motives behind his critics. At the time, Spurgeon was on the cusp of the mass changes waiting in the wings of the Victorian Era. His less formal style and universal appeal were harbingers of the rise of the working class and more liberal thinking, both in religion and society.

Charles Spurgeon continued to preach until the end of his life in the same way he had done from the beginning, with conviction, fervor and a white handkerchief. He brushed off his critics, and continued to do what he did best. His popularity did not wane during his thirty-eight years in the pulpit when he died on January 31, 1892 at the age of fifty-seven after delivering his last sermon just days before.⁵⁹

Spurgeon, who had at one time believed his lack of formal training would be his undoing, had succeeded because of the lack

thereof. By being un-tethered to religious formality, his success was in his simplicity and by appealing to commoners like himself. Spurgeon had reached out to the masses with a message of hope, humor, and inspiration not found in the other churches. By appealing to the common man, he found himself and his ministry awash in uncommon success.

⁵⁹ Curiously, Spurgeon died at exactly the same age as many other great Christian ministers—John Calvin, William Tyndale, Jonathan Edwards, Jeremy Taylor, and Spurgeon's personal favorite, George Whitefield.