

Footprints



CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

GREAT PREACHERS

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE AND MINISTRY
OF CHARLES SIMEON



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The minister of whom Lord Macaulay in 1844 could say that “his real sway over the Church was for greater than any Primate” must have been remarkable in Christian character and life. Yet outside certain circles Charles Simeon has been largely forgotten. And even where he is remembered it is his achievements more than his spirituality that is emphasized. The present article seeks somewhat to remedy this defect.

Simeon was born at Reading on 24 September 1759, a year that saw also the birth of William Wilberforce and the Younger Pitt, in the midflush of the 18th century Evangelical Revival. When nine years of age he entered Eton, and ten years later King’s College, Cambridge, subsequently becoming a Fellow, an office he held until his death on 13 November 1836. Ordained an Anglican Deacon in 1782 he was a year later appointed a minister of Holy Trinity Church Cambridge, a post that the eminent Puritans Drs Richard Sibbes and John Preston once held, and here he served for fifty-four years until his death. For the first 12 years Simeon encountered much opposition from townsmen and gowmsmen. During this early period the seat-holders locked their pews so that they could not be used and when he brought in forms and chairs the churchwardens threw them out. At that time no college Fellow would walk with him, and most parishioners closed their doors on him. Although ostracized, mocked, aped and vilified, his perseverance, patience, meekness, biblical convictions, and spiritual mindfulness eventually won universal respect until, says Constance Padwick, he became “The finest religious influence in England” (Life of Henry Martyn p62), in his own words, “Stones on the seashore lose their rough angles by rough friction”, a basic maxim that became part of his life.

As a youth with no facial handsomeness to commend him, he had been known for his wild ways, flamboyant dress, and love of horses. As a Christian he became utterly devoted to Jesus Christ in an age when it was unfashionable to be an evangelist, counting amongst his closest friends the father of the Reformation and others back of them to whom God was a living Being who still worked in the hearts and lives of mankind.

Fundamentalist Journal caters for many interests – mortality in society, missionary subjects, bible teaching, reviews, etc. – but, in our view, if it continues to serve readers such as Pastor Sandlin, it will be doing something of major significance and, we hope, of far-reaching influence.

John Newton, William Wilberforce, John and Henry Venn, and Henry Thorton the banker. A simple memorial in Holy Trinity Church bears words that sum up his life: “Whether as the ground of his own hopes or the subject of all his ministrations (he) determined to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him

crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). From this spiritual dynamic his ministerial motive had been to bring all Cambridge and England to faith in Christ.

Simeon's conversation process began three days after his entering Cambridge when Dr William Cooke, Provost of King's, informed him that he must take the Holy Communion at mid-term at the Chapel. Sensing that, in his own view, Satan was more fit to receive it than he was, he became oppressed by the weight of his sins and envied a dog's mortality in contrast to the unbeliever's endless life after death. For three months he sought by prayer, Bible reading, good deeds and fasting to make himself right with God but only became ill, until Bishop Wilson's short book on the Lord's supper opened his soul to the cardinal doctrine of Christ's righteousness imputed to the sinner by unmerited grace through faith alone. Learning that the Jews had transferred their sins to the head of the offering he asked, "Has God provided an offering, (His Son) for me that I may lay my sins on His head? Then, God willing, I will not bear them on my soul one moment longer". Some weeks later, on 4 April 1779 he awoke on Easter Sunday crying, "Jesus Christ is risen today, Hallelujah! Hallelujah!". From that hour peace flooded his soul and, as he says, "At the Lord's table in our chapel I had the sweetest access to God through my blessed Saviour". From that hour he never departed from the truth of justifying faith on the grounds of Christ's atoning sacrifice. It was the anchor to all he afterwards believed in, preached, and lived by. Long after his death a High Anglican churchman on reading Moule's Life of Simeon admitted that he himself once thought that faith was preached too exclusively. "Now he said, I think it is not preached enough".

From then on the pure spirituality of an English saint began to shine through Simeon, translucent in all he was and attempted, and illuminating his somewhat dull features. People noted his bright smile that expressed joy and tranquility from a heart at rest in Christ; and always in the pulpit he showed happiness and good cheer. He was no ascetic mystic, preferring practical holiness to flights of experimental claims to emotional encounters with God. In this he differed greatly from Wesley's stress on instant perfectionism or a "sinless state" of perfect love. His concept of vital Christian living is summed up in words he wrote to a young clergyman. "Walk close with God; it is the only way to be either safe or happy. Live retired – read much – pray much – abound in all offices of love – seek the company of those from whom you may receive edification in your soul – by dying daily to the world – consider yourself as a soldier that is not to be "entangled with the things of this life – be faithful unto death". He believed that Christ likeness was possible only by a life of decreasing self. In his view Christianity was not a system but a remedy that produces knowledge of the heart's evil, deep contrition, and self abhorrent loathing.

Simeon's counsel to the Eclectic Society – a group of Evangelical clergy who met frequently in London from 1798 to 1814 to discuss theological, ethical and current questions" – was always wise, incisive and direct.

To correct faults of character, he advised “The pure and perfect example of Christ should be kept before us. Confess to God; conceal not sin. Run over your sins in prayer at night. Trust not yourself”. On a subsequent occasion he illustrated this by stressing that the remedy was love of God in the heart, especially over one’s habitual defects which are like a wrong warp continually woven into the woof, “for it is in little things not in great that weakness of character is to be found”. As the Holy Spirit quickened his conscience regarding wrong thoughts, attitudes, reactions, actions, and omissions of duty, he lived in an atmosphere of repentance that found its focus in Christ’s cross. He made a sharp distinction between the unbeliever’s warrings of conscience and the Christian’s spiritual warfare. The former quietens conscience by “a sense of shame.....resolutions, self-righteous endeavours, mortification, and his own and other’s approbation”. But the Christian abhors all sin, implores God’s help, and by a dependent waiting looks to the power of Christ, on the ground of his promises of deliverance, and desires a clean conscience as the sublimest joy, and hates the smallest sin as a wedge to which Satan will give blow after blow”.

On a discussion concerning temptations peculiar to ministers and the way to resist them, most of the clergy present raised moral issues – pride, man-fearing, envy, covetousness, arrogance – but the practical Simeon rooted them in pastoral failure – not conversing with others about Christ, not using laity to care for children and the sick, not praying in secret for God’s presence, not giving sufficient attention to one’s own devotional life.

All these and other derelictions of Christian duty sprang, he felt, from not loving God as God; a spiritual omission common to most Christians. Simeon never fell into the error of loving God solely for what He had done for him and for what he continued to do. God is to be loved and adored, he stressed, for what he is. Two years before he died he wrote to Daniel Wilson in Calcutta: “In God, and in God alone, I have all that I can need; and therefore, my eyes are turned to him always, Him exclusively, Him without a shadow of doubt. Were I to look within the medium of my own experience, it would be like looking at the sun through the medium of the waters; the sun would appear to move as the water undulates; whereas when viewed in Himself alone, he is uniformly and steadily the same”. And later to the same recipient: “I love to see the creature annihilated in the apprehension of, and swallowed up in, God; I am then safe, happy, triumphant. And I recommend to you to enter into the chambers of all his glorious perfections, and to shut the door about you, and there abide till he shall have accomplished all the good purposes of his goodness both in you and by you. Nothing less than a mutual indwelling of God and God in us will suffice – beyond that we want nothing”.

But while Simeon held that “We are bound to love God for his own perfections”, this for him was no disinterested love, for such, he said, is an “unscriptural refinement without having any respect to the benefits which we receive from him”. He stressed that, “Gratitude seems to be the principle that animates all the

redeemed in heaven..... By this all the most eminent saints on earth have been distinguished..... There is not any precept in the Bible plainer than those which related to this subject". Thus, "God's free, undeserved, rich, and various mercies, the blessings of his providence and of his grace are to be praised individually, fervently and incessantly". To be overwhelmed by the Lord's loving-kindness, of which he thought scripture was full, was, he asserted, "the one source of all the benefits we enjoy, our chiefest support under all trials, and is the privilege of all the Lord's people".

From the truth that "God's love is seen in all his dispensations", it follows that "to know God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent is the highest principle and perfection of man. This attainment, infinitely beyond all others, constitutes true wisdom". To acquire this knowledge, Simeon felt that the works of God as well as the Word of God must be studied for "they mutually reflect light upon each other". His succour of the distressed, attention to prayers, loving-kindnesses, the painful operations of his grace, and his hand in everything must be considered. On the ground that, "There is nothing small, when considered in relation to the possible events which may spring from it..... see to it then that your daily mercies call forth suitable returns of love and gratitude". In a sermon on despondency Simeon counseled his hearers to fix their faith "on God whose power is mighty, his mercy rich, his ways mysterious, his promises sure". His own love of the Saviour at times burst forth him in room murmuring, "Glory, glory, glory to the Son of God".

A spiritual fruit that commended itself to foes and friends alike was his deep humility that shone forth in his daily walk with Christ and in his relationship with others. He was always quick to apologize even to an undergraduate to whom he had shown annoyance for treading gravel into his carpet, and to a groom whose pardon he begged for irritation over putting a wrong bridle on his horse. He coveted humility as "the true nature of Christianity", and loved the value of humiliation, confessing "There I feel I am in my proper place". He sought by God's grace "a growing downwards" in a kind of life of decreasing self year by year, "Humility 1, Humility 2, Humility 3" were in his view "the three essential lessons a minister of the gospel has to learn". In his notebook he wrote, "Talk not about myself". He desired, "The whole of my experience to be one continued sense – 1st, of my nothingness, and dependence upon God; 2nd, of my guiltiness and desert before Him; 3^d, of my obligations to redeeming love as utterly overwhelming me with its incomprehensible extent and grandeur. Now I do not see why any one of these should swallow up another. That they are separable in imagination, like the rays of light, I well know: but that they should be combined in action, I am well convinced".

Simeon abhorred and vehemently silenced any praise of himself, and was always ready to ask forgiveness when conscious of harshness or severity to another however justified. He realized that at times he did not love every person as he loved his closest friends. His remedy was, "To consider what dispositions we show towards the dearest objects of our affections, and to put every human

being in their place". He tried to govern his attitude to others on the scripture principal, "The Lord's servant must not strive", and although he became the most influential clergyman of his day and was honoured by the friendship of the highest in the land, he showed no petulance or envy that he was never made a church dignitary, but quietly pursued his ministry with patience and faithfulness to the Lord. Without humility he felt that holiness was non-existent. "I love simplicity; I love contrition", he said; "Even religion itself I do not love if it be not cast in the mould of humility. I love the religion of heaven; to fall on our faces while we adore the Lamb is the kind of religion my soul affects".

He was "content to find peace and joy while lying as clay in the Potter's hands", and when dying he wished, he said, not to be surrounded with friends, but "to be alone with my God, the lowest of the low".