

Lessons from Church History (Part 2)

WEEK 10: Lessons from 19th Century Evangelicalism

Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892)

- Charles Haddon Spurgeon is widely considered the greatest preacher since Christ and the Apostles. He preached to more than 10 million people. His sermons were widely printed in major newspapers. 50 million sermons were published and translated into 40 languages by the time he died. His sermons are the largest output of any English-speaking author in history.
- He was the most popular and controversial figure of his day, calling out the dead Christianity of the time and sparking reformation and revival across the Evangelical world.
- He was a fiery and effective evangelist. While testing the acoustics in the vast Crystal Palace where 23,654 would gather, Spurgeon shouted, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world", converting a worker high in the rafters. He used memorable illustrations that arrested his hearers. When asked about the success of his preaching, he said, "My people pray."
- Spurgeon had no ministerial training, but read voraciously, and had a photographic memory. He built a personal library of over 12,000 volumes, mostly Puritan books and commentaries.
- Spurgeon was born in Kelvedon, England. His father John was a pastor of a Congregational church. He spent much time with his grandparents when he was young. His grandfather James was a pastor at Stambourne for 58 yrs and had the biggest spiritual impact on Charles' early life.
- Charles was famously converted in a Primitive Methodist Chapel during a snowstorm when he could not reach his own church. The pastor of the church was unable to make it to church, so an unnamed laymen delivered a sermon from Isaiah 45:22 that arrested the boy and brought him to Christ.
- Spurgeon preached his first sermon at age 16. In 1851, he was called to pastor a small church in Waterbeach for the next 2 years.
- Spurgeon was called to pastor the New Park Street Church at age 19. The congregation of 200 quickly filled up. After one year, it was too small. They moved temporarily to Exeter Hall.
- Spurgeon's sermons were recorded by stenographers. He prepared sermons on Saturday night. But from the beginning, they had a quality that matched the greatest sermons in church history.
- Early on Spurgeon was relentlessly attacked in the press. He was belittled for his youth, lack of training and formal ordination. He was called a charlatan, a blasphemer, profane, and diabolical. Salacious lies were perpetrated that caused him untold harm.

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- In 1856, he married Susannah Thompson. At first, she thought he was unkempt. His haircut was atrocious, and he was badly dressed. However, they developed a friendship that blossomed into a romance. They had twin sons: Charles and Thomas. Shortly after that Susannah became ill and was largely bedridden the rest of her life, nonetheless, she made profitable use of her time.
- Spurgeon began preaching at Surrey Gardens Music Hall in 1858. It held 10,000 people. The first service was tragic. Someone yelled “fire!” and a mad rush for the exits killed 7 people.
- After 3 years at Surrey Hall, the Metropolitan Tabernacle was opened in Spring of 1861. It was modeled after the Parthenon. It could hold 6000 people. Members rented 3000 pews on a 3-month rotating basis. This was the church’s main source of income. The rest were let in 5 minutes before service started. Spurgeon took no salary but lived off royalties from his publications. 70 to 120 people per month were admitted to membership in the first several years of opening.
- The Tabernacle had over 40 different ministries that operated within the city of London and beyond including the Stockwell Orphanage for boys (in 1867) and then another orphanage for girls (in 1879). Ministry took place at the church 7 days a week. The doors were open at 7 am and closed at 11 pm. One of the unique ministries was the Lavinia Bartlett’s class for women. It started with 3 girls and eventually had 500 regular attenders.
- Spurgeon started a pastor’s college that trained over 900 men for the ministry. He spent Friday afternoons lecturing to the men (many which were collected as *Lectures to my Students*).
- Spurgeon spent Monday’s editing his sermons for publication that came out on Thursdays. On Tuesday afternoons, he met with inquirers who needed counsel on becoming believers. When the numbers were too large to handle, others were trained to counsel seekers. If conversion was unclear, they were often directed to take classes instructing them in the Christian faith. Women were often directed to Mrs. Bartlett’s class. As many as 900 women were converted under her teaching ministry.
- On Tuesday nights the church had prayer meetings where testimonies were heard, and new members admitted to the church. Spurgeon took Wednesdays off but preached at other churches during other times of the week.
- Spurgeon was at the heart of numerous theological controversies in his day. The most significant became known as the Downgrade Controversy. It began in 1887 when he was 53 and wrote an article in his magazine *The Sword and the Trowel*.
- In wake of the controversy, Spurgeon battled constant illness. He had suffered throughout his life, having problems with gout by age 33. He often traveled to Menton, France to get away in the sunshine and recuperate. In 1888, he had a severe fall, tumbling head over heels down a marble stairway. Eventually, he died from kidney failure at age 57. Over 100,000 people attended 4 funeral services. His son Thomas succeeded him as pastor at the Metropolitan Tabernacle.