



Spurgeon and humour

As one of the most significant evangelists of the nineteenth century, Spurgeon is sometimes portrayed as a rather dour figure. He was earnest about his faith and mission, but Spurgeon also loved laughter. Humour was an integral part of his life and ministry.



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Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–92) was one of the greatest and most influential preachers of the Victorian era. He was well known far beyond his British base. His church, the Metropolitan Tabernacle in south London, was not just the largest in Britain but the largest in the whole world. His printed sermons were translated into languages as varied as French, Telegu, Maori and Welsh! The ministers he trained through his 'Pastors' College' (now called Spurgeon's College) served throughout the British Isles and in many other places too. Australia was one country where 'Spurgeon's men' had a particular impact. A snippet from an American newspaper helps illustrate his global reach. In 1858, when Spurgeon was still only 24, the *North American Review* was reporting that Americans returning from a trip to England were invariably asked two questions, namely, 'Did you see the Queen?' and 'Did you hear Spurgeon?' There was, the paper continued, 'scarcely any name more familiar' than the London pastor's in the whole of America.¹ Spurgeon was an international celebrity and a figure of worldwide importance in the nineteenth century.²

Spurgeon is sometimes represented today as a rather dour figure. It is true that he was in deadly earnest about the Christian faith. A powerful, passionate preacher, he wanted to stick as closely to the message of the Bible as he could, and he always sought to point people to Jesus. In this sense, Spurgeon was a serious man with a serious mission. But he also loved laughter. In fact, part of his remarkable ability to communicate the gospel to ordinary people lay in his use of humour. He used a variety of amusing stories, jokes, puns and one-liners. This was true of his preaching, writing and engagement

with people one-to-one. This was certainly one of the reasons why a host of men and women – many of them ordinary down to earth people with little formal education – found him such an attractive personality.

Humour in preaching

Spurgeon once commented that some Christians seemed to have invented an extra commandment, 'Thou shalt pull a long face on Sunday.' His own attitude was somewhat different! 'I would rather hear people laugh,' he said, 'than I would see them asleep in the house of God.' Humour and happiness could be just as 'holy' as tears, he reasoned. Moreover, laughter could open a door for a person to hear and receive God's message.³ Spurgeon's use of humour in church services was frowned upon by sections of the press. One cartoon of Spurgeon, which appeared in 1870 in the old British publication, *Vanity Fair*, was accompanied by the caption, 'No one has succeeded like him in sketching the comic side of repentance and regeneration.' The preacher refused to apologise for his approach, although in practice he did keep the humour in check, in case it detracted from, rather than enhanced, his message. Nevertheless, examples of his sense of fun abound in accounts of services he took. Once, when conducting a wedding, he told the young couple that he hoped their wedded life would not be like the Church of England marriage service, which began with the phrase, 'Dearly beloved' but concluded with the word, 'amazement'!⁴ It was far better, Spurgeon reasoned, to go through married life saying 'dearly beloved' from beginning to end! On another occasion when preaching about the

Old Testament character, Lot, Spurgeon commented that Abraham's nephew had given his uncle a whole 'lot' of trouble.⁵ This last example is typical of Spurgeon, and I am aware that such punning is more likely to induce a groan than a laugh today! But his hearers clearly loved it, perhaps because it was 'natural' (a word that was often used to describe Spurgeon's humour) and not studied or forced. Through his liveliness and sense of fun, Spurgeon had a gift of making people laugh, even when the word play itself sometimes left something to be desired!

Humour in books

Spurgeon wrote a number of books in a popular style. These included collections of proverbs and rhymes (with many of these similar to the pun on Lot's name!) and two books he wrote under the pen name, 'John Ploughman'. In *John Ploughman's Talks* and *John Ploughman's Pictures* the writer's stated aim was to communicate in 'mirthful vein' and with a 'rustic style'.⁶ These were books for the masses, with short pithy sections and plenty of pictures. The homilies were simple and straightforward, yet deceptively profound. These are stories which have something important to say. Readers are warned against being 'people pleasers' and about the dangers of outward show. There are numerous encouragements to simple faith in God and holy living. The tales are peopled by characters such as 'Jack Careless' who 'squandered his property' and 'Joe Scroggs', a 'poor fool' of a drunkard who spent so much of his money on 'muddy ale' he had to sell most of his furniture to help pay for his drinking. Here is humour, but humour with a serious point.

On the covers of the original 'John Ploughman' books, Spurgeon appeared dressed in a farmer's smock! Another of his books, *The Way of Salvation*, also carried an illustration on the cover, this time of some Victorian public baths. The picture was designed to highlight one of the central thrusts of the written text. All people, whether rich or poor, needed to be 'washed', that is, forgiven and made clean through believing the gospel. It was this – the good news of Jesus – that was the answer for people like 'Jack Careless' and 'Joe Scroggs'. Spurgeon wanted the sort of men and women who were looked down on by polite, respectable Victorian society to come to Christ. If humour helped him to communicate with such people, then humour would be used.

Humour with friends

Spurgeon's friends and acquaintances often commented on the laughter which could light up his public ministry. But their abiding memory was of the way he made them laugh in private. One of his close friends was William Williams, a minister who had trained at the Pastors' College. Williams wrote: 'What a bubbling fountain of humour Mr. Spurgeon had! I laughed more, I ... believe, when in his company than during all the rest of my life besides. He had the most fascinating gift of laughter

I ever knew in any man and he had also the greatest ability for making all who heard him laugh with him. When someone blamed him for saying humorous things in his sermons, he said, "He would not blame me if he only knew how many of them I keep back."⁷

The self-censorship which Spurgeon practised in his preaching – keeping his humour firmly in check – was relaxed in private. Once again, word play was to the fore! Spurgeon once greeted someone with the words, 'Glad to see you Mr Partridge!' The man replied, 'My name is *Patridge*, sir, not *Partridge*!' The quick response was, 'I won't make *game* of you any more!'⁸ Cue groans! The following piece of word play is, if anything, even worse, not least because it is so obscure! When asked by someone, 'In what coloured ink should a promise of marriage be written?', Spurgeon responded, 'in violet' (the pun was on the word, 'involute'). Apparently he was so delighted with this off-the-cuff remark that he tried it on a number of other occasions with different friends. You might not be surprised to learn that many were

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completely bemused and had to have the joke explained to them!⁹

Perhaps Spurgeon's sense of fun is better illustrated by a story told by the very first student at the Pastors' College, Thomas Medhurst. Billed with the man who would later become Principal of the College, George Rogers, Medhurst had indulged in a game of snowballs outside Rogers' house one winter's morning. Rogers' wife had rebuked the young student. This was not conduct becoming of a trainee Pastor! When Spurgeon himself arrived and heard the compliant, he made it clear that if he had seen the fight he would have been tempted to join in with it himself! Nevertheless, he proceeded to issue Medhurst with a rebuke. In a tone of mock solemnity he declared, 'Young man, you are forgiven this time; but see that you transgress no more – until the next fall of snow!'¹⁰

Humour and suffering

The joy that characterised Spurgeon's life continued to be evident despite significant suffering in his later years. That suffering was both physical: from the late 1860s Spurgeon struggled with rheumatic gout and, later in life, kidney problems, and also mental: Spurgeon had a tendency to depression. Yet, for the most part, Spurgeon's good humour remained. On one occasion, his stick, which he needed to use for walking because of his gout, slipped at the top of a marble staircase. He fell down the stairs, ending up badly bruised and shaken, with two teeth knocked out. But soon Spurgeon had recovered enough to quip that the fall had been 'painless dentistry' (obviously it was painful in one sense;

Notes

1. *North American Review* (Boston: Crosby and Nicholls, 1858), p. 275.

2. For further biographical details see P Morden, *C.H. Spurgeon: The People's Preacher* (Farnham: CWR, 2009).

3. CH Spurgeon, *Autobiography* (4 Vols; London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1897–99), Vol. 3, p. 339.

4. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, the marriage service closed with the words, 'Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord; whose daughters ye are as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement.'

5. Spurgeon, *Autobiography* Vol 3, p. 346.

6. CH Spurgeon, *John Ploughman's Talk; Or, Plain Advice for Plain People*, Preface (London: Passmore and Alabaster, nd); *John Ploughman's Pictures, or More of His Talk* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, nd). The examples of stories and characters in the rest of the paragraph are taken from *John Ploughman's Pictures*.

perhaps Spurgeon was thinking of the high fees dentists could charge!).¹¹ Such joy was sustained by a sense that Christ was present with him in suffering, but also by the hope of heaven. Writing to a friend who was terminally ill, Spurgeon offered words of comfort, assured his friend of his prayers and spoke of heaven to come: 'You have nothing to do but go home', said Spurgeon, 'and what a home!' But Spurgeon was also aware of his own illness, and so he added the following: 'I shall soon come hobbling after you, and shall find you out. We are bound to gravitate to each other whether here or in glory. We love the same Lord, and the same blessed truth.'¹² I don't think Spurgeon literally thought he would be hobbling in heaven! But the gentle humour in evidence here (not least the ability to laugh at himself) is endearing. The reality of suffering was great, but the life and love of Christ was greater still.

Conclusion

Spurgeon's humour does not always work well when taken out of its nineteenth-century context! But it should be clear that contemporaries found him humorous and that, particularly to his friends, he was a man who radiated warmth, life and laughter. Two themes suggest themselves for contemporary reflection – and action.

Firstly, Spurgeon, with his word play and his simple stories of everyday people, communicated effectively with those whom the cultured elite viewed with disdain. The Liberal politician the Earl of Rosebery described Spurgeon disparagingly as the 'apostle of the grocers'. The novelist George Eliot's comments on the Pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle were similar. He held, she said, to a 'grocer's back-parlour view of Calvinistic Christianity'.¹³ Spurgeon, who was in fact a man of huge intellectual capacity, would have taken this sniping as a complement. Do we have the same desire to communicate, and the same willingness to be despised as we share the good news of Jesus in the language of ordinary people?

Secondly, Spurgeon's joy and ability to laugh in the midst of suffering is an example and a challenge to us. The reality of Jesus in his life shone through, even when he was in severe pain. His humour was ultimately sustained by a real relationship with the authentic Jesus. So, by life and by lip, Spurgeon pointed people to Christ.

7. W. Williams, *Charles Haddon Spurgeon: Personal Reminiscences* (rev. and ed. M Williams; London: Religious Tract Society, 1933), p. 24.

8. Spurgeon, *Autobiography* Vol. 3, p. 345.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 351.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 353.

11. GH Pike, *The Life and Work of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (6 Vols; London: Cassell, 1894 [1892–93]), Vol. 6, pp. 308–309; CH Spurgeon to Newman Hall, 20 January 1889, in C Spurgeon (ed.), *The Letters of C.H. Spurgeon* (London: Marshall, n.d. [1923]), p. 195. Charles Spurgeon, the editor of this collection of letters, was one of C.H. Spurgeon's sons.

12. CH Spurgeon to T Curme, 12 June 1884, in Spurgeon (ed.), *Letters of C.H. Spurgeon*, p. 169.

13. Both as cited by J Munson, *The Nonconformists: In Search of a Lost Culture* (London: SPCK, 1991), p. 99.

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Dr Paula Gooder is recognised to be one of the most insightful and helpful biblical scholars around.

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