

Umbrellas, Great-Coats and Polished Shoes, and the Spirituality of Charles Simeon

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In 1 Corinthians 9:24 Paul speaks about the race in which we all compete: ‘But only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.’ In Paul’s day there were the athletic games; in Charles Simeon’s day the races at Newmarket. But there was still only one prize. In Simeon’s opinion, the race was ‘away from Satan . . . and the prize is heaven’.¹ We are all runners in this race—and just look at the competitors as portrayed by Simeon:

There is one coming out of the door to run, but it rains, so he goes back for an umbrella and puts it up and sets off; I warrant he’ll never win the race. Look! another is coming out; he has noticed the rain and cold, so he has buttoned himself up in a thick great-coat – he won’t win the race. Yonder comes another, with fine polished shoes; see how he picks his way for fear of dirtying his bright shoes and dainty dress. Ah! I doubt there’s no prize for him. But, come now; here’s a different sort of man – one in earnest; look at his face. He has business in hand, and he means business. Umbrella? No; *I don’t care for the rain!* Great-coat? No, no, it would hinder me. Muddy roads? Never mind; the prize is worth all that and more too. I warrant you that man will win the race; he is set upon it; his mind is made up for winning. He starts; he forgets all that which is behind, reaches forth unto the things which are before him, and presses towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Oh! my friends, if you and I want to win heaven, we must not make child’s play of religion; we must ‘so run that we may obtain’.²

Simeon took his faith seriously and encouraged other people to do the same. This surely remains true for us today? We are still taking part in the race, the race in which Simeon himself took part. His Christian faith and spirituality sustained him, and provided a distinctive model for the generations which followed his example. Yes, we need to study Christianity and history, but as Christian believers we also need to take our faith seriously so that theory and practice become one – in an integrated whole. The one should enrich the other.

Four Characteristics of his Spirituality

Simeon’s ‘School of Divinity’

By any standards, Charles Simeon’s CV is very modest. He was born into a wealthy Reading family in 1759 and died in Cambridge in 1836. He was educated at Eton and then King’s College, Cambridge. He remained there for the whole of his life as a fellow of King’s and

Vicar of Holy Trinity Church from 1782 to 1836. He never married. Simeon was modest about his achievements. God ‘can and does work by the meanest instruments, I am a living witness; but my sphere has been small, a mere nothing in comparison to others. Yet have I lived to see the triumph of my own principles throughout the land.’³ Lord Macaulay made it clear that: ‘As to Simeon, if you knew what his authority and influence were, and how they extended from Cambridge to the remote comers of England [and you could also add India], you would allow that his real sway in the church was far greater than that of any primate.’⁴

Holy Trinity, Cambridge, was a small parish of between 1000 and 1500 people. But his congregation included a large number of students – not more than 20 when he began his ministry and yet something like 500 attended his funeral. It was through the 13-14 generations of undergraduates that Simeon’s influence spread through the British Empire (and included about 1000 clergy and chaplains, missionaries, lawyers, colonial administrators and members of the professions). So much so that Simeon’s opinions became a recognized ‘school of divinity’.⁵ Abner Brown maintained that: ‘He thought for himself, seldom adopting opinions at second-hand, at least without first making them his own, and adding to them the stamp of his own modifications. He did not aspire to be a leader, nor seek for influence; it came to him unsolicited.’⁶

A characteristic of Simeon was found in his attitude to Scripture (and thus the heart of his spirituality). He was ‘content to sit as a *learner* at the feet of the holy Apostles, and [had] no ambition to teach them how they ought to have spoken’.⁷ Daniel Wilson, Bishop of Calcutta, expressed this as follows:

He conceived early in life the design of forming a school of *Biblicism*, if the term may be employed. Instead of detaching certain passages from the Bible, deducing propositions from these passages, and then making these propositions the starting posts of his preaching, he kept the Bible as his perpetual standard; and used articles of theology for the end for which they were intended, not to supersede the Bible, but to be a centre of unity, a safeguard against heresy and error, and a means of discipline and order in the church.⁸

Simeon described himself as ‘a moderate Calvinist’⁹ or ‘a Bible Christian’.¹⁰ But to speak of his Calvinism may well give the wrong impression – he was no Calvinist, neither was he an Arminian. Both were ‘right in all they affirm, and wrong in all they deny’¹¹ – ‘both right in their principles, both wrong in their inferences’.¹² In his view, Scripture ‘is a far broader system than either Calvinists or Arminians admit’ and he added, ‘this *I* regard as very important’.¹³ Simeon was ‘no friend to systematizers in theology’.¹⁴ For Simeon:

God has not revealed his truth in a system; the Bible has no system as such. Lay aside system and fly to the Bible; receive its words with simple submission, and without an eye to any system. Be Bible Christians, and not system Christians.¹⁵

How did this work out in practice?

His chief source of thought was the Holy Bible itself, on which he meditated ... day and night. When he had fixed on his text, he endeavoured first to ascertain the simple, obvious meaning of the words, which he frequently reduced to a categorical proposition. He then aimed at catching the spirit of the passage, whether consolatory, alarming, cautionary, or instructive. After this, his object was to give the full scope to

the particular truth before him, making it of course really harmonious with the analogy of faith, but not over studious to display a systematic agreement.¹⁶

Simeon was never committed to any mid-position – a harmony of apparently irreconcilable teaching. Rather he adopted a position which included *both* extremes. He propounded his famous dictum concerning the golden mean:

When two opposite principles are each clearly contained in the Bible, truth does not lie in taking what is called *the golden mean*, but in steadily adopting both extremes, and, as a pendulum, oscillating, but not vacillating, between the two.¹⁷

He used a simple picture to illustrate his position: ‘I am like a man swimming in the Atlantic; and I have no fear of striking one hand against Europe and the other against America.’¹⁸ Once, when he was in Paris, he had a discussion with the Duchess de Broglie:

I had a great deal of conversation with her. . . . I opened to her my views of the scripture system, as far broader than either Calvin or Arminius made it; and I showed her that brokenness of heart was the key to the whole.¹⁹

Brokenness of heart was one of his favourite themes.²⁰ Preaching on the theme of ‘A broken heart the best sacrifice’ (Ps 51:16-17) Simeon said:

A broken and contrite heart consists in a deep sense of our guilt and misery – a selfloathing and abhorrence on account of the peculiar aggravations of our sin . . . a readiness to justify God in his dealings with us . . . and such an insatiable desire after mercy, as swallows up every other sensation, whether joy or sorrow.²¹ Till we are thoroughly broken-hearted with a sense of sin, we never estimate aright the unspeakable blessings of redemption... But to the truly contrite, O how precious is the name of Jesus, that adorable name, the foundation of all our hopes, the source of all our joys!²²

Simeon’s spirituality was rooted in his attitude to Scripture, at the centre of which was a brokenness of heart before God.

Simeon’s Conversion Experience

‘Under God’, said Simeon, ‘*I owe everything to Provost [William] Cooke*’.²³ Cooke is known for having translated Thomas Gray’s *Elegy* into Greek verse – a singularly useless exercise! I am reminded of the Cornish clergyman whose life-work was putting 2 Kings into rhyming couplets and who was then disappointed that no copies of his book were ever sold!²⁴

Eton College was a godless institution and King’s College, Cambridge, was not much better. Magdalene College²⁵ and later Queens’ College were the evangelical strongholds. However, college chapel was compulsory for all undergraduates. On Simeon’s third day at King’s he was instructed by Provost Cooke that he must attend the termly communion service and that he must communicate. Simeon felt that Satan was as fit as he was to attend the service, so he felt that he ought to prepare himself. He read *The whole duty of man* (the only religious book he had ever heard of) and spent much of his time in reading, praying and fasting. He obviously attended the service, but does not record having done so. He became a member of SPCK, whose books (he believed) might be helpful to him and could benefit other people.

He read at least two books on communion by John Kettlewell (1653-1695) and Thomas Wilson (Bishop of Sodor and Man 1697-1750). It is interesting to note the Nonjuror/High Church influences on Simeon's spirituality, together with his endorsement of the devotional writings of Benjamin Jenks (1646-1724).

Simeon sought to undo his former sins, writing them down and settling a money debt. His conversion experience took place in Holy Week 1779:

On the Wednesday began to have a hope of mercy; on the Thursday that hope increased; on the Friday and Saturday it became more strong; and on the Sunday morning (Easter Day, 4 April) I awoke early with those words upon my heart and lips, 'Jesus Christ is risen today; Hallelujah! Hallelujah!'²⁶

Simeon received communion in the college chapel, and at the end of the service ate some of the surplus bread and 'covered my face with my hand and prayed'.²⁷ He used to recall his conversion year by year. He spoke 40 years later of having sought after God for three months, and 'after much humiliation and prayer, I found peace through that Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world'.²⁸ During those 40 years he was conscious of two things: 'the one is, my own vileness; and the other is, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. It was his aim to be 'not only *humbled and thankful*, but *humbled in thankfulness*, before my God and Saviour continually. This is the religion that pervades the whole Liturgy, and particularly the Communion Service; and this makes the Liturgy inexpressibly sweet to me.'²⁹

Simeon's spirituality was rooted in his conversion experience, his humility before God and his thankfulness for his salvation through Christ.

Simeon's Personal Discipline

Following his conversion experience Simeon felt rather isolated. There were only a handful of Evangelicals at Cambridge and these included Christopher Atkinson (1754-1795) and Henry Jowett (1756-1830). Outside the university Simeon was encouraged by Henry Venn (1724-1797) and John Berridge (1716-1793). But, to use Charles Smyth's telling phrase, it was 'Yelling [Venn's parish], not Everton, [which] was Simeon's lodestone'.³⁰ Berridge was the eccentric itinerant, the model for the ministry of Rowland Hill; Henry Venn, the exemplary Anglican whose example Simeon was to follow almost to the letter. He was a moderate Calvinist, deeply attached to the Church of England and to the parish system. He became the mentor to Simeon and other Evangelicals at Cambridge. Venn wrote:

Think what a sight I enjoyed at Cambridge, the week before Christmas [1778]. Eleven young men sat, with great attention, to hear me converse with them about the things of God [surely a model for Simeon's own conversation parties]. I like them very much, because they go slowly, and most of them study very hard. Religion was never designed to be a cloak for idleness and ignorance.³¹

Henry Venn wrote *The complete duty of man* to correct the emphasis on works in *The whole duty of man*. Venn rose at 5.00 am for his devotions and had 'a vigorous personal discipline'.³² Simeon followed this example. He rose at 4.00 am and lit his fire (there are

many references to Evangelicals rising early and lighting their own fires – we can be thankful for central heating and gas fires!). He then gave four hours to prayer and the study of Scripture. There then followed what he called ‘family prayer’ with his servant and those staying with him. Simeon’s first convert, Robert Housman, who was Simeon’s lodger for three months in 1784, saw him at close hand:

Never did I see such consistency and reality of devotion, such warmth of piety, such zeal, such love. Never did I see one who abounded so much in prayer. I owe that great and holy man a debt which never can be cancelled.³³

Certainly prayer was central to Simeon’s experience. He spent nights in prayer. He promised to intercede for his friends for a week: ‘This spirit of prayer counteracted the natural roughness of his temper.’³⁴ Early rising did not come easily to him. If he was late getting up he resolved to give half-a-crown to his servant. After all, he reasoned, she needed the money more than he did! He only once threw a guinea into the River Cam, and was never late again!³⁵ He was ‘intensely serious and devout, living to God, and living near to God, laboring for souls, studious of his Bible, and wholly given to his ministerial duties’.³⁶

Simeon’s spirituality was rooted in his own disciplined reading of Scripture and practice of prayer.

Simeon’s Attitude to the *Book of Common Prayer*

After his conversion of 4 April 1779, Simeon received next to nothing from the irreverent way in which the chapel services were conducted at King’s College. The deadness he experienced and loss of Christian fellowship was compensated for by the excellence of the Liturgy (the title he used for a series of four university sermons in 1811). The use of the Liturgy in the college chapel was ‘as marrow and fatness to me’:

This is a proof to me, that the deadness and formality experienced in the worship of the church, arise far more from the low state of our graces, than from any defect in our Liturgy; if only we had our hearts deeply penitent and contrite, I know from my own experience at this hour, that no prayers in the world could be better suited to our wants, or more delightful to our souls.³⁷

Simeon made it clear that it was, ‘The Bible first, the Prayer Book next, and all other books and doings in subordination to both’.³⁸ His devotional life and public ministry were grounded in the Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer*, which he regarded as ‘a composition of unrivalled excellence’.³⁹ The Liturgy was ‘superior to all modern compositions’⁴⁰ and ‘nearer to inspiration than any book that ever was composed’.⁴¹ For Simeon, the Anglican formularies – ‘The Articles, the Homilies, and the Liturgy are the standard of divine truth’.⁴² They all helped to shape his spirituality.

The worship of God, where the prayers were *prayed* and not just *read*⁴³ was a foretaste of heaven itself. Josiah Pratt recalled: ‘I well remember being much struck with the manner in which Mr. Simeon read the liturgy.’⁴⁴

A congregation uniting fervently in the prayers of our Liturgy would afford as complete a picture of heaven as ever yet was beheld on earth.⁴⁵ The extemporaneous effusions

that are used in other places bear no comparison with the formularies of our church.⁴⁶ If *all* men could pray at *all* times, as *some* men can *sometimes*, then indeed we might prefer extempore to pre-composed prayers.⁴⁷

Simeon's appreciation of the Liturgy was clear:

After I had been for months absent in Scotland, I felt the prayers of our church as marrow to my soul when I returned home again. Let any man go to all those churches where our Liturgy is not used, and also to every dissenting chapel in town and country, and note down every prayer which is offered in them, and then compare them with our own, and he will see the value and excellence of ours.⁴⁸

It was evident to Simeon that:

Real edification consists in humility of mind, and in being led to a more holy and consistent walk with God: and one atom of such a spirit is more valuable than all the animal fervour that ever was excited. It is with *solid truths*, and not with *fluent words*, that we are to be impressed.⁴⁹

He greatly valued the way in which Scripture was read in the *Book of Common Prayer*:

I consider it as one of the highest excellences of our Liturgy, that it is calculated to make us wise, intelligent and sober Christians: it marks a golden mean; it affects and inspires a meek, humble, modest, sober piety, equally remote from the unmeaning coldness of a formalist, the self-importance of a systematic dogmatist, and the unhallowed fervour of a wild enthusiast. A *tender seriousness*, a *meek devotion*, and an *humble joy*, are the qualities which it was intended, and is calculated, to produce in all her members.⁵⁰

Simeon's spirituality was rooted in his appreciation of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The Dissemination of Simeon's Spirituality

Having examined four characteristics of Simeon's spirituality, we now look at how his convictions were disseminated and how others adopted his spirituality.

Through his Preaching

Simeon's sermon preparation was very thorough. He took at least 12 hours to prepare a sermon: 'Many twice that time: and some several days.'⁵¹ He redrafted one sermon nearly 30 times! (It is interesting to notice that members of the Eclectic Society often recycled their sermons.⁵²)

One test for Simeon's sermons was expressed as a threefold question. Does it humble the sinner? Exalt the Saviour? Promote holiness?⁵³

A visual impression of Simeon as a preacher is to be found in the silhouettes by A A C F Edouart made in 1828, copies of which are at King's College, Cambridge, and at CPAS at Warwick.

Simeon regularly preached at Holy Trinity, at St Mary's (the university church), Cambridge and elsewhere throughout the United Kingdom. Alongside his *spoken sermons* were his *written sermons*. His 21-volume work, *Horae Homileticae*, which was published in 1833, consists of 2,536 sermons and sermon outlines. It consists of various elements:

- 1 Some of the 32 or so sermons he preached before the university.
- 2 Sermons preached on special occasions, e.g. on the death of Dr Joseph Jowett and the Rev William Cadogan; on the opening of Holy Trinity Church, Cheltenham.
- 3 Outlines of sermons, many of which were originally preached in Holy Trinity, Cambridge.
- 4 Some sermon outlines especially written for *Horae Homileticae*.
- 5 'An essay on the composition of a sermon' by Jean Claude.⁵⁴

Through his Congregation

From 1796 when he had engaged Thomas Thomason as his first curate, Simeon divided up the core of his congregation (120 members) into six societies with about 20 people in each. There were separate societies for men and women and during the course of a month Simeon met with each society. In addition, there was a society of 12 men designated as stewards who had the management of the collections for the poor; they informed Simeon about the affairs of the six societies, and brought to his attention matters of error or sin:⁵⁵

I could make use of them in the first instance to rectify any little disorders, and reserve myself to interpose in matters which they were unable to accomplish. I considered myself as a coachman upon the box, and them as the reins, by which I had immediate access to every individual in my church: and, from the most mature reflection, I cannot but consider this as of the greatest importance to the welfare of any people.⁵⁶

Through his Student Meetings

These meetings were highly significant in bonding together those who were to become the key players in Simeon's 'school of divinity'.

From 1790 Simeon began sermon parties which were intended for those who were to be ordained. From 1812 he began conversation parties for all members of the university, irrespective of whether or not they were considering ordination. They were a sort of one man's brains trust, or 'Simeon's table talk'⁵⁷ and were the basis of Abner Brown's *Recollections of the conversation parties of the Rev. Charles Simeon MA*, published in 1863.

We can picture the scene. Simeon sat in a high chair to the right-hand side of his fireplace. In front of him a series of benches, occupied by his visitors. Even the window recesses had seats in them. Simeon would come in and sit down, fold his hands on his knees, turn his head on one side and ask in a quiet, slow voice: ‘Now, if you have any question to ask, I shall be happy to hear it, and to give what assistance I can.’⁵⁸ As the questions were asked, two waiters handed out tea to those in the room – ‘it was mostly kindly provided by our dear friend, who was always very considerate of our comfort and ease’.⁵⁹

Through his Individual Counsel

Simeon constantly prayed for his friends, supported those who were ordained and, where possible, advised them about curacies or livings. From 1796 he arranged an annual summer houseparty for clergy and their wives. For two days 20 or 30 would meet together at a large house. Simeon referred to clergy wives as ‘ministresses, half-ministers, often the most important half in your husband’s parishes’.⁶⁰

Through Clerical Meetings

The first clerical society was begun in about 1750 by Samuel Walker of Truro. Thereafter at least 12 societies were formed. Some were short-lived but others longer-lasting. Simeon is known to have supported and attended the clerical societies at Little Dunham (1792), Rauceby (1795), and Creaton (1802). In London, Simeon occasionally attended the Eclectic Society (1783). It consisted of about 13 London clergy and 13 country clergy (including Simeon). His irregular attendance between November 1798 and April 1811 is noted in *The thought of the Evangelical leaders*. Eventually the Eclectic Society was superseded by the Islington Clerical Meeting (1827-1982).

Through his Correspondence

Simeon was an extensive letter-writer – and had some 7,000 letters stored in his sideboard – some of which are included in William Carus’s *Memoirs of the life of the Rev. Charles Simeon MA*, published in 1847. Many of the letters are addressed to Thomas Thomason, Simeon’s first curate, who went to India as an EIC chaplain. Simeon was godfather to his son James and acted as his guardian in England.

Through his Personal Devotion

‘Evangelicalism’, said G R Balleine, ‘was essentially the religion of the home’.⁶¹ Simeon intended that *Horae Homileticae* would be used as ‘a family instructor’ to be read by heads of households.⁶² If one sermon was read every day the whole would take seven years to read! Alongside *Horae Homileticae*, Simeon encouraged the use of *Prayers and offices of devotion for families, and for particular persons, upon most occasions*, by Benjamin Jenks.

Benjamin Jenks (1646-1724) was curate, then rector, of Harley, Shropshire. His first edition of *Prayers and offices* appeared in 1697. The 26th edition was improved by Simeon, and the 13th of this improved edition was published in 1822. Simeon’s editorial work was minimal in

shortening the sentences and improving the style. All he did was to make improvements and allow Jenks to ‘appear in his native dress’. The book expresses three things dear to Simeon’s heart:

- (a) ‘The prayers appear to have been prayed and not written.’ This was something he felt strongly about and advocated the practice to his followers. Like Simeon, they too prayed the liturgy.
- (b) The prayers expressed humility. For Simeon, the minister had to learn three lessons – ‘Humility, humility, humility’.⁶³
- (c) ‘A fervour of devotion’ which expresses a characteristic of Simeon’s personal life.

In all of the published work on Simeon there is no reference to Jenks’ *Prayers and offices of devotion* (apart from being listed in the *DNB*). Yet considering how popular it was (and in use at about the same time as John Keble’s *The Christian Year*) it ought to be regarded with some significance and as an example and expression of the spirituality of Charles Simeon.

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Endnotes:

- 1) A W Brown *Recollections of the conversation parties of the Rev. Charles Simeon MA* (London 1863) p 14
- 2) A W Brown *Recollections* p 15
- 3) W Carus *Memoirs of the life of the Rev. Charles Simeon MA* (London 1847) p 796
- 4) G O Trevelyan *The life and letters of Lord Macaulay* (London 1876) Vol 1 p 68
- 5) Brown *Recollections* p 58
- 6) Brown *Recollections* p 59
- 7) *Horae Homileticae* (London 1836) Vol 1 p xxiv
- 8) Carus *Memoirs* p 840
- 9) Carus *Memoirs* p 418
- 10) R S Dell ‘Simeon and the Bible’ *Charles Simeon (1759-1836)* A Pollard and M Hennell (edd) (London 1964) p 32
- 11) Brown *Recollections* p 267
- 12) Brown *Recollections* p 280

- 13) Carus *Memoirs* p 566 footnote
- 14) *Horae Homileticae* Vol 1 p xxiii
- 15) Brown *Recollections* p 269
- 16) Carus *Memoirs* p 842
- 17) Brown *Recollections* pp 74-5
- 18) Carus *Memoirs* p 842
- 19) Carus *Memoirs* p 580
- 20) D Webster 'Simeon's Pastoral Theology' Pollard and Hennell pp 97ff
- 21) *Horae Homileticae* Vol 5 p 424
- 22) *Horae Homileticae* p 425
- 23) Carus *Memoirs* p 710
- 24) A C Benson *The life of Edward White Benson* (London 1899) Vol 1 p 480
- 25) J D Walsh 'The Magdalene Evangelicals' *The Church Quarterly Review* October-December 1958 pp 499-511
- 26) Carus *Memoirs* p 9
- 27) Carus *Memoirs* p 10
- 28) Carus *Memoirs* p 518
- 29) Carus *Memoirs* pp 519-20
- 30) C Smyth *Simeon and church order* (Cambridge 1940) p 271
- 31) H Venn (ed) *The life and a selection from the letters of the late Rev. Henry Venn MA* (London 1834) p 262
- 32) D M Lewis (ed) *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730-1860* (Oxford 1995) Vol 2 p 1138
- 33) R F Housman *The life and remains of the Rev. Robert Housman AB* (London 1841) p xviii
- 34) Carus *Memoirs* p 841
- 35) H C G Moule *Charles Simeon* (London 1892) p 83

- 36 J H Pratt *The Thought of the Evangelical leaders* (1856) (Edinburgh 1978) p 100
- 37 Carus *Memoirs* p 10
- 38 Brown *Recollections* p 12
- 39 *Horae Homileticae* Vol 2 p 246
- 40 Carus *Memoirs* p 520
- 41 *Horae Homileticae* Vol 12 p 437
- 42 *Horae Homileticae* p 436
- 43 Brown *Recollections* p 12
- 44) Pratt *Evangelical leaders* p 69
- 45) *Horae Homileticae* Vol 3 p 342
- 46) *Horae Homileticae* p 341
- 47) Carus *Memoirs* p 114
- 48) Brown *Recollections* p 228
- 49) *Horae Homileticae* Vol 2 p 252
- 50) *Horae Homileticae* pp 267-8
- 51) Carus *Memoirs* pp 841-2
- 52) Pratt *Evangelical leaders* pp 390-1
- 53) *Horae Homileticae* Vol 1 p xxi
- 54) *Horae Homileticae* Vol 21 pp 287-410. There is a useful analysis of Claude's *Essay* in C Smyth *The art of preaching* (London 1953) pp 183-201
- 55) Pratt *Evangelical leaders* p 490
- 56) Carus *Memoirs* p 140
- 57) Brown *Recollections* p x
- 58) Carus *Memoirs* p 649
- 59) Carus *Memoirs*

- 60) H E Hopkins *Charles Simeon* (London 1977) p 120
- 61) G R Balleine *A History of the Evangelical party in the Church of England* (London 1908) p 111
- 62) *Horae Homileticae* Vol 1 p xxvi
- 63) Carus *Memoirs* p 74