

# The Parochial Ministry of the Leaders of the Eighteenth Century Evangelical Revival<sup>1</sup>

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Mention the evangelicals of the eighteenth century and many will conjure up pictures of George Whitefield and John Wesley proclaiming the gospel to hundreds or thousands at Moorfields, Kingsdown and other such venues. They are portrayed as never so happy as when they are preaching, and so it is not surprising that a century later in 1853 W. J. Conybeare caricatured the evangelical clergyman as being ‘out of his element in a parish ... what he likes is, not a parish, but a congregation. The possession of a chapel in a large town, which he may fill with his disciples, is his idea of clerical usefulness’.<sup>2</sup>

This statement may reflect the fact that at that time the rise of Anglo-Catholicism and introduction of the trappings of the unreformed Church of Rome had caused many evangelical lay people to petition for a church where the style of worship would continue to reflect the simplicity of the Book of Common Prayer. In many cases bishops were reluctant to allow new parishes to be carved out of the existing ones, and so if we take the case of Jesmond Parish Church in Newcastle it was initially proposed that the new church should be founded as a proprietary chapel. Similarly, at the other end of the country, when an evangelical philanthropist desired to endow a church, vicarage and school in the parish of Ware because the incumbent had adopted Anglo-Catholic practices, the diocesan authorities initially suggested that a proprietary chapel would be preferable.

For this reason, in many cases in the nineteenth century evangelicals may have found themselves prevented from exercising a truly parochial ministry because of the restrictions placed upon them by having no parish in which to minister. Such inhibitions are still with us today. Church Society Trust has the patronage of the historic Mariners’ Church in Gloucester Docks, where a massive development of new flats has recently been built. The incumbent of the parish church in which this is situated was too busy to visit these new residents himself, but had forbidden the minister at Mariners’ to visit and give information about his church, even though the flats were built overlooking it.

This, however, is taking us too far ahead, as our purpose in this article is to look at some of the leaders of the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century and consider the extent to which their ministry centred on their preaching, and how they related their new-found enthusiasm for the gospel to the needs of the souls entrusted to their cure. To do this I have studied the biographies and writings of four of the leaders: William Grimshaw (1708-63), Henry Venn (1724-97), John Newton (1725-1807) and Charles Simeon (1759-1836). These four, ministering in very different contexts and at different times during the century, should give us an insight, however sketchy, into how our evangelical forbears sought to carry out the charge laid upon them at their ordination.

First of all we need brief details of these men so that we can set them in their respective contexts. Grimshaw was born in 1708 and ordained in 1731. It was only after a period of questioning and searching during 1734-42 that he came to a clear understanding of the gospel of grace, and in the latter year he was appointed to the parish of Haworth in West Yorkshire—a parish known today for having had Patrick Bronte as one of Grimshaw's successors. Here he ministered for 21 years until he contracted what was referred to as 'the putrid fever' and died in 1763.

Henry Venn was born in 1724 and, like Grimshaw, ordained at the minimum permitted age of 23 in 1747. From 1750 to 1754 he was curate to a rector who held the livings of St. Matthew, Friday Street in the city of London and West Horsley in Surrey, but it was only when he became curate of Clapham parish church in what was then Surrey that he came to a living faith, largely through friendship with the Christian businessman John Thornton, whom we shall meet later. In 1759 he was appointed to the vicarage of Huddersfield where he ministered for the next eleven years. In 1770 he resigned that charge because of ill-health and moved to the less demanding parish of Yelling in Cambridgeshire: surprisingly he ministered there for 26 years before finally resigning in 1796 and moving to live with his son, John, who by then was the Vicar of Clapham. He died in the following year.

John Newton's career is perhaps better known in view of the recent film about Wilberforce, and Newton's dealings with him over the abolition of the slave trade. Born in 1725 he went to sea with his father after his mother had died just before his seventh birthday. In 1750 he married and in 1755 he left the sea

to become the Surveyor of Tides at Liverpool, having spent the previous years growing in his understanding of the gospel. The period from 1757–1764 was spent in exploring the possibility of ordination, and in 1764 he was ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln (whose diocese stretched from the Humber to the Thames) to the curacy of Olney in the north of Buckinghamshire. After fifteen years there he moved in 1779 to the parish of St. Mary Woolnoth in the City of London, where he ministered until his death in 1807.

The last of our four, Charles Simeon, was born in 1759 and the story of his conversion is fairly well-known. Going up to Cambridge in 1779 he discovered that he was expected to receive Holy Communion and was convicted of his deep unworthiness, finding assurance through the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement on Easter Day. On graduation in 1782 he was ordained as a Fellow of King's College, and had a great desire to be able to minister in the church of Holy Trinity. In November he was appointed to that church, not without considerable opposition from a party who wanted another candidate, so for years he ministered there in the face of considerable opposition. In due course he overcame the opposition and won great respect, and when he died in harness fifty-four years later Cambridge virtually closed down for his funeral.

### Great Expectations

So much by way of brief biography. In the ordinal of the Book of Common Prayer the bishop enjoins the candidates for the presbyterate in these terms:

We exhort you, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you have in remembrance, into how high a dignity, and to how weighty an office and charge you are called: that is to say, to be messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord; to teach and to premonish, to feed and provide for the Lord's family; to seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad, and for his children who are in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ for ever.

Have always therefore printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge. For they are the sheep of Christ, which he bought with his death, and for whom he shed his blood. The Church and Congregation whom you must serve is his spouse and his body. And if it shall happen the same Church, or any member thereof, to take any hurt or

hindrance by reason of your negligence, ye know the greatness of the fault, and also the horrible punishment that shall ensue. Wherefore consider with yourselves the end of your ministry towards the children of God, towards the spouse and body of Christ; and that you never cease your labour, your care and diligence, until you have done all that lieth in you, according to your bounden duty, to bring all such as are or shall be committed to your charge, unto that agreement in the faith and knowledge of God, and to that ripeness and perfection of age in Christ, that there be no place left among you, either for error in religion, or for viciousness in life.

Such was the standard that was expected in theory, but writing nearer to the time, Bishop Ryle tells us that the vast majority of the clergy of the days we are concerned with were—

sunk in worldliness and neither knew nor cared anything about their profession. They neither did good themselves, nor liked anyone else to do it for them. They hunted, they shot, they farmed, they swore, they drank, they gambled. They seemed determined to know everything except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. When they assembled it was generally to toast “Church and King” and to build one another up in earthly-mindedness, prejudice, ignorance and formality. When they retired to their own homes, it was to do as little and preach as seldom as possible. And when they did preach, their sermons were so unspeakably and indescribably bad, that it is comforting to reflect that they generally preached to empty benches.<sup>3</sup>

Ryle also quotes a letter from King George III himself to Archbishop Cornwallis (Canterbury 1768-83) requesting him to desist from holding ‘levities and dissipations’ and routs at Lambeth Palace, which he regarded as inexpedient, if not unlawful, in a ‘residence devoted for so many centuries to divine studies’.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in his foreword to Cragg’s biography of Grimshaw Thomas Bloomer, then Bishop of Carlisle, quoted the experience of Sir W. Blackstone, an eminent lawyer of his day, going in the middle of the eighteenth century to hear the preaching of every clergyman of distinction in London. His conclusion was that ‘he did not hear a single discourse having more Christianity in it than in the writings of Cicero, and that it would have been impossible for him to discover from what he heard whether the preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mahomet, or of Christ’.<sup>5</sup>

It was against this background that the characters we are to consider exercised their ministry, and it is interesting to read of the considerable time John Newton spent in exploring the path to ordination.<sup>6</sup> John Wesley had tried to persuade him to become an itinerant preacher<sup>7</sup> and a Congregational Church in Warwick would have had him stay as their minister after he had filled a three-month vacancy there,<sup>8</sup> but his heart appears to have been with the Established Church, in spite of earlier reservations<sup>9</sup> and having had applications for ordination rejected by the Bishop of Chester and the Archbishop of York. Both would appear to have rejected him on the grounds of his being tainted with ‘methodism’ even though he had moved to a Calvinistic position in contrast with Wesley’s Arminianism.

Like many other evangelical clergy of his day and subsequent generations he appears to have been encouraged by the reading of Richard Baxter’s *Reformed Pastor*<sup>10</sup> and so caught a vision of the potential for spreading the knowledge of the gospel within the English parochial system. Thus we are told that in his first meditation on the question of ordination he determined that the ministerial character required ‘zeal, courage, diligence, faithfulness, tenderness, humility and self-denial, an extensive knowledge of Scripture, a large stock of Divine experience and discernment. To this must be added a thirst for God’s glory and the salvation of souls, a ready ability to share what one has already learned of God, a desire to wrestle in prayer privately, in assemblies, and in families, a willingness to converse with hearers upon what has been preached publicly; and a determination to use every opportunity to extend the gospel’.<sup>11</sup> Such aims could obviously be best achieved through being entrusted with the cure of souls in the Established Church.

### **Preaching in Season and out of Season**

How did these men set about fulfilling their responsibilities? As one would expect, they saw the primary emphasis must be on their preaching ministry. Not for nothing was Henry Venn known at Huddersfield as ‘T’owd trumpet’, as in days when the majority of the clergy were such as we have already described, those who preached a clear gospel message were soon assured of many hearers. With no modern aids such as amplifying systems these preachers of the gospel made sure that their message would be heard loud and clear. When his churchyard was crowded with people who could not be accommodated in Haworth church Grimshaw resorted to the expedient of

having a scaffold erected alongside the outside wall of the church by a window which was removed and he stood half in and half out of the church so that the congregation in both places could hear the message.<sup>12</sup> There is also a tradition that he would announce the 119th Psalm to be sung while he left the church and visited the local tavern to drive absentees out to church. John Newton tells how a friend of his who was passing one of the inns in Haworth during the time of Divine service thought it must be on fire. He was startled to see a group of men leaping from the windows and others leaping over a low wall. On asking the reason he was told that they had seen Grimshaw on his way to drive them out to the service.<sup>13</sup>

Nor was such preaching confined to the statutory Sunday services. We are told<sup>14</sup> that the classic eighteenth century model of Anglican pastoral care emphasised the role of the clergy ‘not as priestly mediators between God and man dispensing the sacraments, but as pastoral educators, spiritual and moral teachers and guides. Clergy sought to dispel ignorance through catechising, Charity and Sunday schools, private exhortation, and, most importantly, the sermon. Venn followed this model but the key difference, in common with other evangelicals, being the stress on the need for ‘conversion and a religion of the heart’.

Venn is of special significance in that he was unique in having in his Huddersfield days the largest cure of souls of any of the subjects of our study, or indeed of the men associated with the Evangelical Revival of that century. Today the town of Huddersfield consists of a number of parishes, but in his day it was just one. The effects of the Industrial Revolution were being felt, and the thousands in his cure of souls were scattered among a number of hamlets, some being three or more miles from the parish church. So Venn started weekday services in these hamlets, and as he rode on horseback to distant corners of his sprawling parish he would hunt out obscure parishioners in tiny homes and lonely farms.<sup>15</sup> Gathering them together he would, according to his son, address them ‘with a kindness and earnestness which moved every heart’.<sup>16</sup>

In time we read of numbers making the journey each Sunday to hear their vicar in his church. Such was the effect of his preaching that he reckoned that in one three year period there were 900 conversions. In a letter to Lady Huntingdon written in 1762 Venn told her that in that year in addition to his ministry on the Lord’s Day he generally preached eight or ten sermons in the week in those

distant parts of the parish whose inhabitants could not normally get to the church.<sup>17</sup> The effect of his preaching was that many sought him out for personal counsel, and his daughter recalled in her old age how three or four times in a weekday morning the maid would answer the door and go to the study to tell her father, ‘Sir, a man wants to speak to you about his soul.’<sup>18</sup>

### Pastoral Visitation

Grimshaw expressed his deep pastoral concern for every soul in his parish to Newton when he wrote, ‘By my frequent visits and converse with them, I am acquainted with their several temptations, trials and exercises, both personal and domestic, both spiritual and temporal, almost as intimately as if I had lived in their families’.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to reflect that when ‘Alpha’ courses or ‘Christianity Explored’ are being used to great effect, these are in fact no new phenomenon, as this was just the approach of these our forbears. Newton began in Olney a children’s meeting for the purpose of teaching them the catechism, but to quote his own words sought to ‘explain the Scriptures to them in their own little way’. From a small beginning with some twenty children he sometimes had as many as two hundred attending.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in 1743 Grimshaw reported to Archbishop Herring that he had 400 people who were awaiting confirmation and so presumably had been through his catechism courses.<sup>21</sup>

Newton, writing from Olney in 1777 to a man considering ordination, gives us a clear picture of how these men of God viewed their ministerial responsibilities—‘A parochial minister, who lives among his people, who sees and converses with them frequently and exemplifies his doctrine in their view by his practice, having knowledge of their states, trials, growth and dangers, suits himself to their various occasions, and, by the blessing of God, builds them up, and brings them forward in faith and holiness. He is instrumental in forming their experience; he leads them to a solid, orderly, scriptural knowledge of divine things. If his name is not in so many mouths as the itinerant, it is upon the hearts of the people of his charge. He lives with them as a father with his children.’<sup>22</sup>

It was this concern for building up his people in their faith that led Newton to start the famous prayer meetings at Olney for which he and William Cowper wrote the Olney hymns. When the growth of numbers required a larger venue for these meetings his patron, Lord Dartmouth, offered the use of his own

residence, the Great House, the foundations of which can be seen today in a field beside the parish church. Sensing that some parishioners might be overawed by this prospect he got Cowper to write the lines—

Jesus, where'er Thy people meet,  
there they behold Thy mercy-seat;  
where'er they seek Thee Thou art found  
and every place is hallowed ground.

Newton complemented this with his own—

Approach, my soul, the mercy-seat  
where Jesus answers prayer;  
there humbly fall before His feet  
for none can perish there.

The use of home groups for informal gatherings to encourage growth in discipleship is also no modern phenomenon. Wesley developed the use of class meetings among the Methodists, and Venn's work in the hamlets took much of that nature. Simeon's 'Society' grew to such an extent that he had to organise it into six sub-societies which met with their minister once a month<sup>23</sup> while, when Venn moved to Yelling he started a meeting in the rectory kitchen after the evening service which was attended by about one-third of his parishioners.<sup>24</sup>

Another indication of the concern felt for the spiritual welfare of those entrusted to his charge can be found in the letter which Newton had printed and distributed to every household in his parish. This he did in 1768 after he had been ministering at Olney for four years, and in setting out the truths of the gospel he begins thus—

Every person in the parish has a place in my heart and prayers, but I cannot speak to each of you singly. Yet I am desirous to give full proof that I watch for the welfare of your souls; and likewise (if it be possible) to have a witness in every conscience, that none may plead ignorance of those things which it highly concerns them to know. I hope you will receive this paper in good part, as a token of my love, and read it with attention.<sup>25</sup>

I have not been able to discover what effect this paper had, but it is significant that Newton repeated the exercise when beginning his ministry in London at St. Mary Woolnoth.<sup>26</sup>

Both these circulars indicate the distress felt by Newton not to be able to speak personally with every one of the souls entrusted to his cure, but in days when there is much emphasis on every member ministry it is interesting to note that he was one of the first incumbents to train up a team of lay folk to assist him with visiting in the parish. Certainly he did not make this an excuse to avoid visiting himself: in 1765 he told Lord Dartmouth, ‘my afternoons are generally spent in visiting the people, 3 or 4 families a day, and so, in course’.<sup>27</sup> Writing in his diary for 3 June, 1767 he recalls the practice of Richard Baxter at Kidderminster a century earlier and records the resolve to ‘converse singly’ with each of his people in turn for an hour at a time.<sup>28</sup>

### Visiting those in Special Need

Such was their concern for those who might face a Christless eternity that we find these ministers without exception diligent in fulfilling the obligation laid upon them in their ordination charge to minister to the sick. To help him with this ministry Simeon formed a ‘Visiting Society’. In a sermon preached at one of its anniversaries he described its design as being ‘to find out the modest and industrious poor in a time of sickness, and to administer to them relief for their bodies and at the same time instruction for their souls’.<sup>29</sup>

We are told that Grimshaw was exemplary in venturing forth in all weathers, even in a thick snowstorm, to tramp many miles to bring comfort. When asked to tend the deathbeds of hardened sinners his approach had a bluntness which would have appealed to the Yorkshire mind. In his faithful dealing he is reported as saying, ‘the hand of God is upon you, and the devil is ready to take you, and hell to swallow you up: and now it is, “Send for Grimshaw in all haste”.’ Such apparently harsh treatment seems to have borne fruit, for he reported to Joseph Jones that ‘I have buried eighteen of my parishioners this year, and I have good reason to believe that sixteen of them are now in the kingdom of God’.<sup>30</sup>

By contrast Henry Venn reports in a letter to a friend in 1766 of giving himself to reading doctrine, meditation and, ‘as far as my small strength permits, to visiting the sick. Where there is taste and enjoyment I go oftener, but when one person only is to speak, and no answer comes from the company, I plainly see it my duty not to visit’.<sup>31</sup>

Particularly moving is the account given of how Venn one evening took his children to what he termed one of the most interesting sights in the world. ‘He led them to a miserable hovel, whose ruinous walls and broken windows bespoke an extreme degree of poverty and want. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘my dear children, can anyone that lives in such a wretched habitation as this be happy? Yet this is not all: a poor man lies upon a miserable strawbed within it, dying of disease at the age of only nineteen, consumed with constant fever, and afflicted with nine painful ulcers.’ ‘How wretched a situation!’ they all exclaimed. He then led them into the cottage and, addressing the dying young man, said, ‘Abraham Markwood, I have brought my children here, to show them that it is possible to be happy in a state of disease and poverty and want, and now, tell them if it is not so.’ The dying youth, with a sweet smile of benevolence and piety, immediately replied, ‘Oh, yes! Sir, I would not change my state with that of the richest person on earth, which was destitute of those views which I possess. Blessed be God! I have a good hope through Christ, of being admitted into those blessed regions where Lazarus now dwells, having long forgotten all his sorrows and miseries. Sir, this is nothing to bear, whilst the presence of God cheers my soul, and whilst I have access to Him, by constant prayer through faith in Jesus’.<sup>32</sup>

Nor was this concern limited to the sick. We must recall that these were days when many criminals were executed for deeds which would not merit such severe punishment in our days. Henry Venn tells how on April 3rd 1769 he was preaching to a condemned criminal who was chained to the floor of his prison. ‘I am going down tomorrow to spend two days with him,’ he records, ‘I preached one evening in the jail to a small company on “the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which is lost”.’

We similarly read how Charles Simeon paid no less than nine visits to Newgate Prison to preach to the inmates. Records tell us of several condemned criminals in Cambridge whom he pointed to Christ, and in an unpublished letter to John Venn Simeon tells of a man who was hanged for stealing a watch. From the gallows this man testified for half-an-hour to the crowds who had gathered to spectate, telling them that the Lord had given him so strong a faith that death had entirely lost its sting. Humbling himself and exalting Christ he exhorted them to faith and repentance and declared the full assurance he had of entering into glory. Simeon then harangued them from the same scaffold for a few minutes on the faith which could give such serenity and joy in the face of death!<sup>33</sup>

### Pastoral Discipline

Such intimate knowledge of their parishioners and their affairs enabled our evangelical forbears to exercise discipline in ways which would seem strange to many modern ears. In fulfilment of the charge mentioned above to seek out Christ's sheep that are scattered abroad, Grimshaw would spend a Sunday afternoon strolling the moors, vaulting five-barred gates if occasion demanded, and searching for those who were breaking the Sabbath with unseemly sports. So Baker tells us that in 1749 the archdeacon's court disciplined nine youths from Haworth 'for leaping, jumping and practising other disorderly exercises on the Lord's Day and thereby neglecting to attend divine service'.<sup>34</sup>

Another group of young people from Haworth were in the habit of going to a place called Hoyle-Syke Green, about a mile from the village, where they would indulge in undesirable and immoral activities. After giving warnings from the pulpit, Grimshaw went there in disguise, and joined the group who were holding hands in a circle. When he was recognised they all fled in panic except for the two whose hands were held in his iron grip. Requesting them and their comrades to meet him in the parish church he there prayed with them and made them promise never to repeat their practices, a promise which led to the ceasing of their activity.<sup>35</sup>

He was similarly keen to use his love of disguise to test the reality of people's Christian profession. On another occasion he dressed as a poor beggar in need of a bed for the night, and called at the home of a couple who made extravagant claims as to their Christian commitment. When the householder persisted in refusing to give the assumed beggar any help, the vicar revealed his true identity and gave a lecture on 'covetousness and hardheartedness, as would have shaken the nerves of the old devil himself'.<sup>36</sup>

Even more striking is the case of Esther Greenwood of Haworth who, according to the records of York diocese, was required to attend Haworth Church during divine service bareheaded, barefooted and with a white sheet wrapped around her and to repeat the following prayer of confession after the minister:

Whereas I, good people, forgetting my duty to Almighty God, have committed the detestable sin of fornication with Joseph Wright and thereby have provoked the heavy wrath of God against me, to the danger of my own soul and evil example to others, I do earnestly repent and am

heartily sorry for the same, desiring Almighty God for the merits of Jesus Christ, to forgive me this and all my other offences, and also ever hereafter to assist me with His Holy Spirit, that I shall never fall into the like offence again, and for that purpose I desire you all here present to pray with me.<sup>37</sup>

### Every Member Ministry

We have already drawn attention to the way in which these men encouraged their laity to share in the work of ministry. Simeon wrote on one occasion to a bishop about a pastor's work in these terms:

The giving of himself to the Word of God and prayer seems to me to be his peculiar duty; and the paternal part—of administering relief etc—should, I think, be delegated to others under his superintendence, as Moses delegated many of his duties to the seventy employed by him. This is what I have done myself for nearly fifty years: I have thirty (male and female) in their different districts ... By these, I hope great good has been done.<sup>38</sup>

We have noted that Newton developed the practice of taking parishioners with him when visiting, and he would encourage spiritually mature lay people to visit the sick: in his diary he records how one of the first converts from his ministry, Richard Stamford, had been particularly useful and acceptable in such ministry. He also encouraged such friends to share in speaking and praying at his meetings during the week.<sup>39</sup>

In a recent study of the work of the clergy in the century under review Bill Jacob, the Archdeacon of Charing Cross, draws attention to the fact that prior to the passing of the Poor Laws it was the responsibility of the incumbent and church wardens to administer poor relief.<sup>40</sup> John Riland, who was Venn's curate at Huddersfield, tells how his vicar was so ready to help those less fortunate that his wife would empty his pockets of all cash before he went out visiting in case he might give away all their own money.<sup>41</sup>

Olney was famed for its lace-making, as a visit to the Cowper and Newton Museum will quickly reveal, and in 1780 Cowper wrote of near 1200 lace-makers in this beggarly town, hundreds of whom were starving because of the loss of the domestic market for lace. With the help and support of the wealthy evangelical merchant John Thornton, Newton was able to help the poor with financial gifts as well as distributing bread, Bibles and other spiritual books.

Such was his liberality that in 1781 his successor Thomas Scott was embarrassed at not being able to match it.

### Procuring Opportunities

Such opportunities for spreading the gospel through the parochial system in a day when bishops and many other patrons were chary of appointing clergy tainted with ‘methodism’ to their parishes led Charles Simeon to develop the strategy of purchasing advowsons (the right to appoint an incumbent) and to this end he set up his Trust which still operates today. ‘The securing of a faithful ministry in influential places,’ he wrote, ‘would justify any outlay of money that could be expended on it. Others purchase *advowsons*, I purchase *spheres* wherein the prosperity of the established church and the kingdom of our blessed Lord may be advanced; and not for a season only, but, if it please God, in perpetuity also’.<sup>42</sup> Thus he set his sights on strategic centres such as Cheltenham, Bradford, Colchester, Ipswich, Clifton, Hereford and Northampton to name but a few.

When Simeon presented Venn’s grandson John to a living in Hereford he wrote, ‘You are a physician, going to thousands dying of the cholera, and have a sovereign remedy for them. Think of nothing else but the remedy. Get into the spirit of the Apostle Paul. Think what he would say and do in your circumstances. Souls are perishing for lack of knowledge. I wish you had known your honoured grandfather. The only end for which he lived was to make all men see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. My dear friend, let that be your *one* labour with *all*, and *every day* and *every hour*’.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, in an age when we have so much instant communication by telephone and e-mail it is important to recognise the value of the ministry exercised in those days by correspondence. As has been hinted above, the subjects of our study were voluminous letter-writers, and the records which remain to us show how they used their pens to great effect in giving advice, often at length, on spiritual matters. They not only exchanged letters among themselves on doctrinal subjects, but were approached by various people for guidance and help. Typical in this connection is the response of Venn to an anxious mother asking about her rebellious older son: she should not try to ‘restrain him from balls, cards, etc.’, but present the Christian faith not as a duty but as the ‘best pleasure’ which ‘rejoices the heart more than wine’ and ‘renders tasteless ... vain amusements’.<sup>44</sup>

### Lessons for Today

To review the parochial activity of these great men has been an exhilarating experience but it leaves the question: is this just an exercise in nostalgia, an antiquarian enquiry, or are there important lessons we can learn for the present generation of evangelical ministers? I believe there are four primary ones: no doubt readers will be able to think of more.

First of all, in our modern age which seems to be obsessed with targets and statistics, the men whose ministries have been the subject of our study have emphasised time and again the value of a soul. While students of the eighteenth century evangelical revival have generally focused on the crowds flocking to hear the gospel that had largely been obscured by the church of the day, these ministers never overlooked the importance in God's sight of the individual. Whether it be Grimshaw trudging the Yorkshire moors in all weathers to rescue an impenitent soul from the jaws of hell, Newton discipling by means of letters, or Simeon nurturing those who would form the next generation of evangelical ministers, each in his own way has demonstrated their love and care for the individuals in their pastoral care.

The earlier quotation from Newton highlights the importance of the minister being seen around in the parish, and visiting among the people. In days when parishes are being amalgamated and the number in each cure of souls is steadily increasing it is important for clergy not to excuse themselves on the grounds that they do not have the time for this exercise. I know personally of one church where there are four families in regular attendance who were brought to faith in Christ by the vicar calling on his neighbours. The latest prayer letter from the Christian Union in Oxford University reports that one of the new evangelistic tools to emerge during the past term has been room visiting. 'In several colleges Christians have gone from door to door offering people the opportunity to talk about spiritual issues and ultimately Jesus. The positive response to this has surprised many who have done it'.<sup>45</sup>

The work of these men illustrates the value of the occasional offices: the use they made of contacts with parishioners coming for baptisms, weddings and funerals. A minister reviewing his time at the end of a curacy expressed surprise that he had enjoyed taking funerals. In his congregation there were about a dozen widows or widowers who had come into faith through such contact.

Paul points out that God has given pastors and teachers ‘to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up’ (Eph. 4:11,12). In 1857 Mgr. George Talbot wrote to Archbishop Manning, ‘What is the province of the laity? To hunt, to shoot, to entertain. These matters they understand, but to meddle with ecclesiastical matters, they have no right at all.’ Against such a background it is encouraging to recognise how keen our evangelical forbears were to encourage every member ministry, and to see that such shared ministry can be a major influence in the spiritual growth and development of members of the congregation.

We began our study by recalling the solemn charge laid upon ministers at their ordination: let me close with a Scripture which has been before me throughout my ministry and I am sure was of both inspiration and challenge to our evangelical predecessors. Summarising his own work, Paul wrote to his friends at Colossae, ‘We proclaim Him (Christ), admonishing and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me’.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. This is an edited version of a paper given at the 2008 Conference of the Protestant Reformation Society.
2. W. J. Conybeare, *Church Parties in Essays Ecclesiastical and Social*, 1855, p. 89, quoted by Alan Munden in *A Light in a Dark Place*, Clayton Publications, Newcastle, 2006, p. 27.
3. J.C. Ryle, *Christian Leaders of the Last Century*, Nelson, 1885, p. 17.
4. *Ibid.*
5. George G. Cragg, *Grimshaw of Haworth* (Canterbury Press, 1947), p. 5.
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