

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Summer 1992 No. 45

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CHARLES SIMEON AND THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

By David Streater

There is little doubt that Charles Simeon was one of the most remarkable ministers ever to have graced the pulpits of the Church of England. It is our belief that through his ministry of fifty-four years at Holy Trinity, Cambridge the foundational evangelicalism of the Reformed Church was re-established in the parishes of our land, and that a major impetus was given to the work of mission from these shores. But to understand this in its context, it is necessary to return to the events of the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy and particularly, the Act of Uniformity of 1662.

Restoration and Division

There is no doubt that the Commonwealth period, whatever the rights and wrongs of the Civil War, had like most civil wars, done some good but a great deal of harm to the nation. And this was one of the reasons for the request for Charles II to return to the throne. In spite of the legacy of bitterness at the removal of some two thousand Church of England incumbents, it was a time when, with a little patience, and a great deal of Christian forbearance much good might have been done to the Church by maintaining within its ranks the moderate Puritans. But with the harsh enactment of the Act of Uniformity of 1662, and the ejection of some two thousand Puritans, the Church was split.

With the disabilities placed upon the non-conformists and the parish churches in the hands of ministers who were better at hunting, shooting and fishing than shepherding the flock of God, it is not surprising that the spiritual state of the nation declined and morality followed in its train. Not until the 1730s did the Evangelical Revival begin with the Wesleys and George Whitefield and the small group of parish clergy who were converted independently at that time.

But the Revival, although it was occurring within the Church of England, was in danger of being driven into non-conformity by the caution of the Bishops, the hostility of many parish clergy, and the aggressive evangelistic zeal of the evangelical preachers. It is our belief that Charles Simeon at Cambridge played a major role in maintaining and extending evangelicalism within the ranks of the Church of England from which it had been driven by the policy of the Stuarts.

Background

Simeon was born into a wealthy family at Reading in 1749, and was still a child through the early years of the Revival. He was educated at Eton and at nineteen won a scholarship to King's College Cambridge. Simeon was made deacon in 1782 and ordained presbyter in the following year. He was a Fellow of King's all his life and held only one living, that of Holy Trinity Cambridge, but it was in a highly strategic situation. Simeon died in 1836 and his life therefore spanned the second wave of the Revival which is often ignored. It was a period not only of extension but also of consolidation; a period of major growth which affected every stratum of society.

His Conversion

Simeon came from a High Church family, which must be distinguished from the later Anglo-Catholic party. The High Church Party was robustly Protestant but holding high views of episcopacy and the sacraments. In politics it was Tory. It was from this background that Simeon went up. He was advised that it was required of him to prepare himself for Holy Communion at mid-term some three weeks away.

Simeon was shocked because he realized that he was entirely unworthy of taking the sacrament. He says in a private memoir. ‘ . . . the thought rushed into my mind that Satan himself was as fit to attend as I . . . ’ He set himself to prepare both in heart and mind. He read Bishop Wilson of Sodor and Man (1697-1755) to prepare his mind, and fasted and prayed, seeking the Lord. The knowledge of a substitutionary atonement and an imputed righteousness was effectively brought home to him, and on the following Easter Sunday, he awoke to a full assurance of faith in the risen Christ.

His Ministry

His early years of struggle and loneliness before he was accepted by the University and the Church at large, we leave to one side. Only a man given to much prayer and self-discipline would have survived and that by the grace of God. But survive he did, to mould generations of faithful gospel preachers.

Simeon was essentially a man of one book, the Bible. This delivered him from a narrow party spirit. Although a convinced minister of the Church of England, his fellowship was with nonconformists in England and Presbyterians in Scotland. It also delivered him from a rigid dogmatism in doctrine and enabled him to recognize the gifts and graces of other Christians who did not always see things precisely as he did. This was true of his relationship with John Wesley in spite of the Calvinist/Arminian controversy.

It was in preaching and teaching that Simeon excelled. Preaching before the revival was a dry as dust affair of the reading of an essay, in stark contrast to the Puritan pulpit style. The Revival brought back preaching full of life and fire but among the lesser preachers, not too much direction. Simeon developed the idea of ‘skeletons’ or outlines to give direction to the sermon and his own style of delivery was ‘lively and impressive to the last’.

The Undergraduates

One of Simeon’s great desires, interrelated to the preaching of the Gospel to win souls to Christ, was to prepare a godly ministry. To this end he gave regular informal tea-parties for the undergraduates which consisted in his teaching them in a variety of theological subjects. This is still one of the best methods of training Gospel ministers because it has as much of the heart as the head in it. To assist the preachers, Simeon prepared the ‘Horae Homilecticae’ which were the skeletons of the sermons from the whole Bible, published in 1840.

But there were problems for converted men who had been instructed by him in finding positions of usefulness either on the Mission field or in parochial ministry. To bring the Gospel to bear on the Mission Field Simeon was involved in the sending of promising ministers to India through the East India Company’s Chaplaincies. The best known of these was Henry Martyn. Simeon was also involved in the founding of the Church Missionary Society. At home, with monies received in legacies from his family, he purchased advowsons in order to present evangelicals to parochial appointments. Such a purchase was Cheltenham Parish Church for three thousand pounds, a very large sum, when Francis Close was appointed.

Simeon’s influence on the Church of England and its Evangelicalism was incalculable. The Revival had restored the authority of the Scriptures and the knowledge of the Gospel in all its Pauline strength. But those who espoused the Evangelical cause were more than likely to have been put out of the Church for breaching parish boundaries. Simeon taught the men under his influence to respect Church order and to work within the framework. From the initial hostility which he attracted in the early years, Simeon came to be one of the most loved and respected figures in the Church of England. Both Church and nation owe him a great debt of gratitude.

David Streater (at the time of publication) was Director of Church Society.