



KINDLED FIRE

*How the Methods of
C. H. Spurgeon
Can Help Your Preaching*

Zack Eswine

MENTOR





To my dear friend and father in the Lord, Bob Smart,
who in a used bookstore in Muncie, Indiana,
first introduced a searching college student to
the benefit of preachers who have gone before us, and to
the necessary ministry of the Holy Spirit
for the preaching of the Word.

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Spurgeon is well known to the evangelical world as the 'Prince of Preachers.' But lesser known are the similar challenges that his times and ours share. The decline of effective preaching, moral decay within the churches, and the cultural assault on the validity of biblical Christianity converged and formed the context in which Spurgeon preached the gospel. As the threat of these darkened clouds and swirling winds inched closer, casting their sun-blocked shadow over the flowers and trees, roads and villages, Spurgeon cried out to God to anchor the pulpit for his generation and give it a voice again, the voice of the one who can speak to storms and silence them. Facing our similar challenges, preachers today can learn from Spurgeon to cry out for 'kindled fire' and to preach as if such a fire could, indeed, rise again from God for our generation.

Kindled Fire

'Kindled fire.' The metaphor calls to mind a once-blazing flame now cooling into slowly fading embers, perhaps at a campsite in the late hours of a long night. To kindle a fire is to step out into the chill of morning darkness and to stoke blackened wood into heated contact with patches of brown bark and skinny twigs. The result is an intensified illumination in the night which produces a renewed heat amid the sunless cold.

For Charles Spurgeon, 'fire' referred to that authority, that ardour of soul, that unnatural earnestness which could, in the context of God's Word, fill the preacher and his congregation when these were graciously visited by God's Spirit. That such a fire could be kindled refers to the local and intensified or awakened presence and working of the





Holy Spirit in and through His preachers and His people. 'Fire' is the Spirit's provision. Kindling a spiritual fire depicts the fresh stoking and blowing of God's empowering and manifest presence.

But why should God's preachers and people require kindled fire? Doesn't the fire from God's Spirit always burn full among them? Sadly and importantly, the Bible reminds us, and the history of preaching confirms, that as preachers and as congregations, we are readily able to forget our need of fire in the night. Often our blaze grows cool and what a generation finds in its pulpits is a dissipating smoke.

The Fashions of the Times

Every generation must have its joust with those who are ambitious to intimidate and threaten the advance of the gospel. Every preacher must face his fears and flatteries within the vice of these temptations. Consequently, the church must continually decide upon which source it will lean for relevance and gospel power in its pulpits. Essential for preachers is the ancient truth that 'there is nothing new under the sun.' Thus, we should not be surprised that Spurgeon's times offer significant parallels in substance with our contemporary times.

Beginning in 1865, Spurgeon gave an annual conference address to the alumni of his Pastors' College. Over the next twenty-seven years, the decline of ministerial power amid the issues of the age formed his recurring theme.¹ 'It is hard to win attention to the Word of God,' he lamented. 'We all feel that a hardening process is going on among the masses.'² Elsewhere he concluded, 'Revelation which is unchanging' is not considered 'fast enough for an age of which it may be said, "Change is its fashion".'³

Spurgeon was not alone in his assessments. A host of Victorian voices agreed that 'the pulpit is no longer a power in the country.'⁴ Such sentiments sound foreign to those of us who often regard the nineteenth century as a golden age of preachers. But though many of our preaching heroes lived during that century, their numbers may indicate not a golden age of culture, but rather God's grace given to preachers to counter an age in decay. We must remember that the roots of this 'hardening process' which Spurgeon observed





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lay externally in the soils of Darwinism, rationalism, and the higher critical movement. Add to these the French Revolution and the Enlightenment and one remembers the dominant secularism which was growing throughout Europe.⁵ These external pressures began to cave in on the church, forming what Spurgeon called a 'squint' in the pulpit. The Bible was no longer clear in the vision of preachers. They began to set their eyes on both Moses and Darwin, looking 'to revelation and speculation' for their sermons.⁶

But challenges to the necessity and centrality of preaching arose from other cultural quarters as well, focusing discussions of relevance and power in the pulpit on cultural concerns. Preachers at the turn of the twenty-first century may be surprised when they look at this list of nineteenth-century challenges closely. Hindrances to preaching arose from:

- The expansion of media access through the penny press, which minimized laymen's dependence upon a local preacher and enabled them to pay less attention to the preacher's authority in the community.
- Skepticism, suspicion and doubt resulting from Darwinism; higher critical skepticism challenging the claims of the Bible; human reason becoming a more trusted authority.
- Shorter attention spans due to the frenetic pace of the culture, material gain, illiteracy and the perceived dullness of logic.
- A renewed attention to rhetoric, eloquence and scholarship for respectability in society.
- An increased preference for artistry over sermons as architecture, music and other forms of art were increasingly sought to counteract the decline in church attendance.
- Material opportunity hindering clergy willingness to serve 'lesser' calls.
- Seminaries seemingly unable to train pastors for the realities of ministry, which were too demanding.
- Time demands hindering sermon preparation and communion with God. Pastors felt that they were



spending their time doing everything other than prayer, preaching and care for people.

- The plagiarizing of sermons arising as a needed relief from the demanding pace of ministry.⁷

Spurgeon summarized these concerns in a letter to the readers of his sermons in 1892. He wrote: ‘Our nation is fast learning to forget God.... In too many instances ministers of religion have propagated doubt and the result is a general hardening of the popular feeling, and a greatly-increased neglect of public worship.’⁸

Challenging the Sermon

It is helpful for twenty-first-century preachers to recognize that these sweeping cultural challenges in the nineteenth century fueled movements which began to publicly challenge the role and practice of preaching itself. Some of this dialogue was captured in the journals of the time. As one observed, if the ‘sermon cannot be altogether got rid of, it can of course be shortened...the standard length being reduced from half an hour to a quarter.’⁹ The idea of a sermon lasting less than half an hour was echoed by others. Albert Evans sounded what to him was a hopeful note, stating that sermons had ‘improved certainly as regards length,’ and vary rarely approach an hour long.¹⁰ ‘In an average church,’ Evans observed, ‘the sermon still touches, or almost touches, the twentieth minute.’ Another compared this growing sentiment with an earlier generation. ‘That impatience with anything over half-an-hour which, more or less, characterises the modern congregation, was a feeling with which our ancestors had no sympathy.’¹¹ Such statements offer a corrective to assumptions which describe the nineteenth century in sweeping terms, as those who uniformly loved dry, storyless, passionless sermons which lasted over an hour in length and were comprised of extended logical argument.

The twenty-first-century preacher will marvel to learn that long before television and postmodernism, keeping attention and shortening sermons was a pulpit concern. We are surprised because we often forget Solomon’s advice that it is folly to say that earlier times were better times. Just as in our day, some of Spurgeon’s contemporaries began



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to express their desire that preaching should hold a lesser place in the practice of the church. They believed sincerely that such a measure would prove more attractive for the culture. 'There are those who hold the opinion,' said William Davies, 'that the function of the pulpit is now utterly decayed, that there is no more use for it, that it must inevitably grow more and more effete, until it shall no longer retain an existence among us.'¹² Louisa Merivale, though differing with Davies in his application of this sentiment, concurred with this belief: 'For ourselves, we should prefer being able to go to church occasionally without having to listen to a sermon at all.'¹³

Others urged the use of story in connection with shorter sermons, noting (in their enlightenment and print-oriented context) that 'an average person can only handle fifteen minutes of bare argument.'¹⁴ The author of this article in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* then begs preachers:

Will not great men – eloquent orators – remember sometimes that they were little children and had little thoughts and loved little things and were easily impressed with any pleasing incident? A tale of tenderness tenderly told occupying four or five minutes in the telling, would have kept them up then, through a quarter of an hour's 'dry as dust logic'.¹⁵

Keeping in mind what an average person can bear was becoming increasingly important. Challenge to dry and abstract discourses filled with bare logic grew long before television arrived. 'I want something for *today* – for overburdened men and women in this year of our Lord 1869,'¹⁶ was the increasing summons. Give us 'something *live* and something that has bearing on our daily work, something that recognizes the seething elements about us and their bearing on the questions of conscience and duty we are hourly called on to settle. Oh, if the clergymen would only study their fellow men more.'¹⁷

These searchings for renewed power in the pulpit led many to combine shorter sermons with story, art and architecture. Dr. Allon in 1888 worried about this trend, wondering how concessions 'to ritual and music' might impact how



churches view preaching.¹⁸ In 1921, Alfred Garvie, Principal of New College, London, similarly noted the damage subtly done when worship is more readily connected with art than with the preaching of the Bible. 'Where devotion is divorced from truth [in one's view of preaching],' Garvie said, 'it is to be observed that the external aids – "the dim religious light" of the pictured window, the symbols of the sculptured stone or the carved wood, the suggestion of the human costume, picture, and gesture, the stimulus of music and song – become and must become more prominent.'¹⁹

Spurgeon resonated with his generation's search for power in the pulpit. He recognized the loss of attention and the creative need for regaining it.²⁰ He certainly agreed with the need for story and decried the 'articulate snoring' of decorum-bound preachers whose souls no longer 'sweat.'²¹ But he warned against those 'doctors' and 'deep thinking' men who put aside the Bible for new schemes of pulpit attraction and power and he lamented preachers who felt they 'must link to the preaching of Christ all the aids of music and architecture.'²² Whether we agree with Spurgeon on these points or not cannot detract us from the central conclusion that an earlier age and earlier preachers had to wrestle with the questions that we in the twenty-first century are wrestling with. Significantly, a student of preaching may learn from Spurgeon that these discussions of skepticism, attention spans, story, art, media and sermon length, while important in their own place, may veil the primary need of the hour. According to Spurgeon, the hope for regaining a relevant and powerful pulpit amid a declining age is not found 'in the preacher' nor 'in the crowd,' nor is it 'in the attention' the preacher 'can attract.' The only hope for regaining kindled fire in the pulpit is 'in God, and in God alone.'²³

The Pentecostal Flame

Specifically, Spurgeon's concern was that discussion for regaining power in the pulpit was prone to leave out the necessity of the Holy Spirit in connection with preaching. 'I am persuaded,' Spurgeon revealed, 'that so far from speaking too frequent upon this matter, we do not often enough extol the Blessed Spirit, and certain ministries almost ig-



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nore his existence. You might attend some chapels and not even know that there was a Holy Ghost at all except for the benediction; and were it not for the liturgy, and the “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost,” there are many of our national edifices where you might never know that a Comforter had been sent to us.²⁴

In contrast, Spurgeon prayed that every preacher who would profess to preach the gospel would ‘learn to speak in entire dependence upon the direction of the Holy Spirit,’ for the Spirit is the ‘secret influence’ from God – a person whose influence is able to make a sermon ‘powerful upon the conscience and converting to the heart.’ According to Spurgeon, a preacher must become convinced of this and learn to declare that ‘It were better to speak six words in the power of the Holy Ghost than to preach seventy years of sermons without the Spirit.’²⁵

The absence of this conviction among preachers troubled Spurgeon. He feared that the decline in Christian influence witnessed in his Victorian age was nothing less than ‘*an evident withdrawal of the Holy Ghost, a grieving of the Spirit in the churches.*’²⁶ If he was right, the greatest need of the hour for preachers and churches was neither to find new methods nor to remain stagnant in age-limited decorum. Rather, they must ‘come back’ to God in Christ, and seek a return of His gracious effusions of power for their generation.

For this reason, Spurgeon could not approach preaching without viewing all of its aspects from the vantage point of the Holy Spirit’s person and work. Spurgeon’s explicit references to the Spirit in preaching seem often and notably absent among his reformed and evangelical grandchildren. For example, it is difficult to imagine such successors crying out from our pulpits today: ‘May the Lord answer us by fire, and may that fire fall on the ministers and then upon the people! We ask for the true Pentecostal flame...this we must have, or our ministry will be in vain.’²⁷

Because of abuses among our number and our right concern to uphold sound teaching, we are often concerned and rightly so, to uphold what is biblical regarding the person and work of the Spirit. But when in a generation our references to the Spirit and preaching become veiled, implied or





only assumed, sometimes another kind of 'abuse' emerges which is equally ruinous for preachers and people. A generation begins to look at preaching as a merely natural or a merely rhetorical event. When this happens, a generation of preaching has no distinguishing characteristics in its approach from that which is customary for non-Christian speechmaking. Furthermore, a generation that only knows what it does *not* believe concerning the Spirit is put into a dangerous situation, having no practical teaching for how to live on the basis of what it *does* believe about the Spirit.

Perhaps some of us as preachers rarely talk about the need for the Holy Spirit for relevant and powerful preaching because we are simply distracted by the fashions of our times. After all, we at the turn of the twenty-first century are called in the West to preach amid watershed changes and tectonic shifts in the cultural landscape. In the midst of shifts from print to visuals and from modern to postmodern perspectives, we are busy discussing how preaching can remain relevant and effective, often focusing our homiletic discussions with little attention to the Holy Spirit of God.

Training Ministers Suitable for the Masses

One of the ways in which Spurgeon attempted to recover an explicit connection between powerful preaching and the Holy Spirit was to train students for the ministry. 'Wherever a great principle is to be advanced,' he said, 'prudence suggests the necessity of training the men who are to become advancers of it.'²⁸ For thirty-five years ministers of the gospel were trained in a two to three year program of ministerial curricula at a college over which Charles Spurgeon resided as President.²⁹ The uniqueness of Spurgeon's College did not lie in the fact that it was the only Baptist option for ministerial training. There was the college at Bristol and Rawdon College, Leeds. Regent's Park College at Stepney and 'a college founded at Bury in Lancashire which was later moved to Brighten Grove,'³⁰ were also available. But what Spurgeon longed for were 'ministers suitable for the masses.' By 'the masses,' Spurgeon meant everyone, including the common people and the poor. As Spurgeon later acknowledged, 'No College at that time appeared to me to be suitable for the class of men that the providence and grace of God drew





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around me.³¹ By 'class of men' Spurgeon referred to men with a deficient education and few financial resources. He believed that such deficiencies ought not to hinder a called man from ministerial training and he intended to do what he could to remove the hindrances. He hoped that such a college would be useful in the hands of God to kindle a fire despite the spiritual decline in London and beyond. Starting a college to train preachers was for him, 'the simplest mode of influencing for good the Church and the world.' He found precedent in the Lord's training of the twelve, in John Calvin's college in Geneva, and in the establishing of such colleges that he had heard about among missionaries in China and Jamaica.

These biblical and historical precedents were given room to take root in Spurgeon's ministry by an unexpected and ordinary moment. Some of the members of New Park Street complained to Spurgeon that one of his converts, T. W. Medhurst, was preaching in the London streets. Medhurst's uneducated speech was an embarrassment to himself and to the church. Accordingly, Spurgeon had a talk with the earnest but uneducated man. The young street preacher agreed that he spoke with mistaken English and that he had other noticeable flaws, but he nonetheless declared to Spurgeon, 'I must preach, sir; and I shall preach unless you cut off my head!' Spurgeon recounted to the complainants what Medhurst had said. To this they replied, 'Oh!, you can't cut off Mr. Medhurst's head, so you must let him go on preaching.' Spurgeon agreed and added, 'As our young brother is evidently bent on serving the Lord with all his might, I must do what I can to get him an education that will fit him for the ministry.'³² The rest, as the expression goes, is history.

The Purpose of this Book

What would it have been like to sit in Spurgeon's classes? I hope this book gives a sense of what students would hear Spurgeon say about preaching if he were to speak with them in the hall, from the pulpit, or on a walk down the streets of London.

Thus, the purpose of this book is to enable preachers to 'apprentice' with Spurgeon for a season in order to learn from him about preaching. It is hoped that such an intern-



ship will prove valuable for contributing to preachers as they mine resources for gospel relevance and power in the twenty-first century. But how could Spurgeon help?

The twenty-first-century preacher in the West will recognize some profound similarities with Spurgeon and his times. It is true that postmodernism and Enlightenment rationalism are very different philosophies. But their results are similar in that they promote widespread skepticism and doubt regarding the authority of the Bible. Furthermore, it is true that the printing press, and not the Internet, spread information rapidly throughout England during Spurgeon's times. But the results are common, introducing a media-access to information which reduces the perceived necessity of the local preacher and supports a local suspicion of clerical authority. The debates about the use of art and sermon length at the turn of the twenty-first century are no different in substance than those found in England at the turn of the twentieth. The effect of attention span and the need for story to accompany logic are not new topics of discussion for preachers. In addition, pressures which reduce time for sermon preparation and engender the temptation for shallow or borrowed sermons are nothing essentially new.

Moreover, we have something else in common with Spurgeon's day. Many of us are trying to offer solutions for renewed relevance and power in the pulpit, with little mention of the Holy Spirit of God.

Conclusion

Spurgeon taught his students to seek a 'kindled fire' as the source for renewed power and relevance in preaching. Below is a sample of the kind of prayer that Spurgeon's students and congregational members would have heard from him amid the spiritual decline of their generation.

Come, Holy Spirit, we can do nothing without thee. We solemnly invoke thee, great Spirit of God! Thou who didst rest on Abraham, on Isaac and on Jacob.... Spirit of the Prophets, Spirit of the Apostles, Spirit of the Church, be thou our Spirit this night, that the earth may tremble, that souls may be made to hear thy word, and then all flesh may rejoice together to praise thy name. Unto



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Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the dread Supreme, be everlasting praise. Amen.³³

Opening his eyes after praying such a prayer from his heart, I imagine he would have turned and looked out over us preachers of the twenty-first century with this exhortation. 'Let the fire be kindled, brethren! Let the fire be kindled by the Holy Ghost!'³⁴

