



Charles Simeon

It is one thing to agree, in theory, that the single Christian life can be a good and useful one. It is quite another to see its possibilities realized in the life of a faithful believer. A picture, after all, says a thousand words. That is why I offer here this brief introduction to Charles Simeon – preacher, discipler of men and single servant of Christ.

Simeon's life

The story of Simeon's life is quite easily told. Born in 1759 to the family of a wealthy lawyer in Reading, England, Simeon was educated at Eton, then King's College, Cambridge. His mother had died when he was young, and his father and brothers did not believe. In his very first term at Cambridge he discovered, to his horror, that he would be required to attend communion. Though ignorant of saving grace, he knew enough to understand that he was completely unworthy to eat the Lord's Supper. But by Easter he was a changed man. A book he was reading on the Old Testament explained how the Jews transferred their sins to the head of their offering; and suddenly he grasped the idea of Christ's atonement. By Easter Sunday he was convinced, and from that day on knew that Jesus' sacrifice had removed his guilt.

In Simeon's day Cambridge was almost completely unreligious, and he found no one with whom to discuss his faith. Eventually he found fellowship with Henry Venn, vicar of Yelling, twelve miles outside Cambridge, and this was greatly encouraging to him. After three years he received a fellowship at the university, which gave him a stipend and certain rights as a member of the college. Such fellowships required that those holding them remained single, but his biographer H.C.G. Moule said he deliberately and resolutely chose it *"that he might the better work for God at Cambridge."*¹ It was his dream one day to be vicar of Holy Trinity Church in the centre of Cambridge, though – and God granted this to him when the Bishop of Ely ordained him a deacon, and after he had spent a summer preaching interim in St Edward's church in Cambridge.

On 10th November 1782 he preached his first sermon at Holy Trinity; and there he stayed until his death on 13th November 1836. Simeon's church had wanted another man to be given the charge, and put up a stubborn and hostile resistance to him for 12 years. Doors were locked against him and against those who wanted to hear him preach. Pews were locked so that anyone attending services had to stand in the aisles or at the back. When Simeon brought chairs for them himself, the recalcitrant parishioners threw them out. But God gave Simeon grace: it made him humble and patient, and he persevered. Eventually he won the respect and love of the church people, and tremendous affection among many students. Over the decades of his ministry, hundreds of young men were trained by his preaching and warmed to his evangelical faith. In the view of Lord Macaulay, son of his friend Zachary Macaulay, writing to his sister in 1844, *"if you knew what his authority and influence were, and how they extended from Cambridge to the remotest corners of England, you would allow that his real sway over the Church was far greater than that of any Primate (Archbishop)."*²

Walk with God

One might well ask where the perseverance of such a man came from. It is hard to imagine anyone patiently enduring such opposition and general contempt for two years, let alone twelve. Where were Simeon's reserves of strength? Those who have studied his life have only one conclusion: his personal walk with God was rock-solid. Simeon was convinced of his own sinfulness, found joy in his salvation, and devoted a great deal of time each day to Bible reading, prayer and fellowship with God's people. He lived simply in a suite of rooms in King's College, first on the ground floor, then after 1812 on the top floor of the building. This gave him considerable quiet and privacy, and he could even walk up and down on the roof (which his bedroom gave access to) completely unseen. Up on the roof he could look

over the town and pray for its inhabitants. His time alone with the Lord was the great source of his remarkable ministry in the heart of Cambridge.

A friend of Simeon's named Housman lived with him for a number of months and described Simeon's daily devotional habits:

*"Simeon invariably arose every morning, although it was the winter season, at four o'clock; and after lighting his fire, he devoted the first four hours of the day to private prayer and the devotional study of the Scriptures ... Here was the secret of his great grace and spiritual strength. Deriving instruction from such a source, and seeking it with such diligence, he was comforted in all his trials and prepared for every duty."*³

It is not hard to understand how this single man, so committed to following Christ, was able to achieve so much in one lifetime.

Preaching

At the centre of Simeon's ministry was his preaching. This was his first priority during the 54 years of his service at Holy Trinity church. Sunday by Sunday he preached through books of the Bible; and he is credited with reviving the Puritan system of expository preaching. Moderate by nature, he did not want to be labelled either Calvinist or Arminian, but he was known as an evangelical Calvinist, and for good reasons. Above all, he wanted Scripture to speak for itself – and made deliberate effort not to intrude between his hearers and the text:

*"My endeavour is to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there. I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding."*⁴

One reason we are able to have such a clear picture of how Simeon preached is that he completed a collection of his sermons in 21 volumes, and lived long enough to place a set of *Horae Homileticae* into the hands of King William IV in 1833. It is known to preachers today as a Bible commentary, but it is really an outline of sermons on the entire Bible, which is a huge achievement, and a gift to the church at large. As *Logos's* introduction puts it, "*Simeon's aim with this commentary is 'Instruction relative to the Composition of Sermons.'* To this end, his exposition of the Scriptures is designed to maintain a focus on the more general aspects of a passage over and above possible treatments of particulars. His test for a sermon, as he teaches in *Horae Homileticae*, is threefold: does it humble the sinner, exalt the Saviour and promote holiness?" Simeon had in mind what might help young preachers as they approach a passage; and the book is a kind of Paul-to-Timothy production; a passing-on of accumulated wisdom to younger men.

Discipleship

Living in King's College and preaching at a nearby church, Simeon became known to generations of students. Though he had been the object of scorn and ridicule in the university community in the early years of his ministry, over time he won the respect of town and gown alike. Students usually first encountered him through his preaching at Holy Trinity; but those who wanted to learn more would be invited to join him for conversation and instruction in his rooms at King's College. He began sermon classes on Sunday evenings for those intending to enter the ministry in 1792, as at that time, though a high proportion of Cambridge students were intending to be ordained, there was no formal instruction for them in either preaching or pastoral work. In 1812, when he moved to larger accommodation upstairs over the archway in the Gibbs building, he began his famous Friday evening tea parties for conversation. These continued until 1830. Every Friday from 6 to 7pm he was available for the students to ask him anything they liked, while his two servants passed around tea. Sometimes sixty or eighty were present. In this way Simeon disciplined a multitude of young men, and had an enormous impact on the Church of England.

But in addition to the large numbers who came once a week, Simeon made himself readily available to those who became his friends. Among these were the future missionary to India, Henry Martyn, and the young man who became the founder of the CMS mission in New Zealand, Samuel Marsden. Simeon kept up a tender, watchful and prayerful correspondence with such men after they left Cambridge. His grief was deep when Martyn died at the age of 31. Simeon also took care of the son of Thomas

Thomason, another missionary, when the boy was sent home to be educated. Young James received the love and care of a son from Simeon, right through his years at school until he later returned to India. Foreign missions, as well as the encouragement of evangelical pastors in England, were two of Simeon's dearest projects.

Simeon's influence spread beyond England. Many summers he travelled to Scotland, and while on a semi-holiday he would visit churches, especially those of the evangelical ministers of the Church of Scotland. Wherever he went he found opportunity for fellowship or to offer encouragement to those in pastoral ministry. He was simply the kind of man always ready to see a need and offer help. He was frequently asked to preach, and enjoyed it immensely – particularly so in that it meant extending the hand of friendship from the English (episcopal) church to the Scottish (presbyterian) church.

Keeping on to the end

Simeon's busy life of service contains another lesson for us: that of labour to the very end. He was active in preaching and teaching right until two months before his death at the age of 77. Three years before he died he even preached five University sermons in one month. (These preaching occasions were open to the whole university community, and to be chosen to preach them was a special honour). Simeon himself believed his durability was a special providence, given to him because of his earlier disobedience. He tells that, in his younger days, he had promised himself a very active life up till the age of sixty, and then a "Sabbath rest" – i.e., retirement. However, in 1807, after 25 years of ministry, his health deteriorated suddenly, to the point that he could hardly speak or walk; and preaching was difficult. This condition lasted for 13 years, until his last visit to Scotland. On crossing the border he suddenly felt his strength revived. From that day on he laboured diligently. He seemed to hear his Master saying to him:

"I laid you aside, because you entertained with satisfaction the thought of resting from your labour; but now you have arrived at the very period when you had promised yourself that satisfaction, and have determined instead to spend your strength for me to the latest hour of your life, I have doubled, trebled, quadrupled your strength, that you may execute your desire on a more extended plan."

John Piper responds to Simeon's use of his old age by asking: *"Is there any biblical warrant for the modern, western assumption that old age or retirement years are to be years of coasting or easing up or playing? I am not aware of such a principle in the Bible ... Who knows whether God would give awakening and revival if we would renew our dreams of ministry to the perishing world and not just the 'ministry' of playing with our grandchildren?"*⁵

When Simeon died, he was honoured by all in Cambridge. Every bell in the town rang at his funeral. Where there had once been almost universal derision of the gospel he preached, there was now respect. This could not have been achieved without the commitment and energy of a life spent like Simeon's. He never married, and had no physical children, yet his sons throughout England numbered in the hundreds. His good work lived long after him.

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¹ Quoted by John Piper in *The Roots of Endurance* (Intervarsity Press, Nottingham, 2002), p.84

² Quoted by Handley Moule in *Charles Simeon* (London, Intervarsity Press, 1965; first published 1892), p.148

³ Quoted by John Piper, *Roots of Endurance*, p. 106

⁴ Quoted by Piper, pp.89-90

⁵ Piper, p.96