

Lecture 31 – The Search for “Real Christianity”: Nineteenth Century England

“But I was a Tory in the sense that I disliked change unless the need for it was amply proved, and that I desired to preserve continuity with the past and keep whatever of the old foundations were sound. As I used to put it in a fisherman’s simile, if your back cast is poor your forward cast will be a mess.” John Buchan

“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” 1 Corinthians 2:2

Background Reading

Gonzalez, ch. 26, pp. 271-73

Prayer

From the Prayer Book of the Church of England: “the Lesser Feasts and Fasts”

“O loving Lord, we know that all things are ordered by thine unswerving wisdom and unbounded love. Grant us in all things to see Thy hand; that following the example of Charles Simeon, we may walk with Christ in all simplicity, and serve Thee with a quiet and contented mind, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee, and with the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”

The Search for “Real Christianity”: Nineteenth Century England

I. The Church of England

A. The broad church

Fielding’s Parson Thwakum: “When I mention Religion, I mean the Christian Religion; and not only the Christian Religion, but the Protestant Religion; and not only the Protestant Religion, but the Church of England.”

B. The evangelical movement—the “low” church

1. Evangelical revival
2. Departure of Methodists
3. Church evangelicals
4. John Newton
5. Thomas Scott (1747-1821)—*The Force of Truth, Commentary on the Bible*
6. Charles Simeon (1759-1836)

- a. Vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge
- b. *Horae Homileticae*

Spurgeon: Simeon’s outlines “have been called ‘a valley of dry bones’: Be a prophet and they will live.”

7. The Clapham Sect (John Venn)

8. William Wilberforce (1759-1833)

“God Almighty has put before me two great objects—the abolition of the slave trade and the reformation of the manners [conduct] of England.”

a. Abolition of the slave trade (1807) and emancipation of the slaves (1833)

John Wesley to William Wilberforce, February 24, 1791: “Dear Sir, Unless the divine power has raised you up to be as *Athanasius contra mundum*, I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing this execrable villainy [slavery], which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well

doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it. Reading this morning a tract written by a poor African, I was particularly struck by that circumstance, that a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a *law* in all our colonies that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this! That He who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things is the prayer, dear sir, [of] Your affectionate servant, John Wesley.”

b. *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1797)

9. Evangelical party in the Church of England—J. C. Ryle (1815-1900), Bishop of Liverpool; Handley C. G. Moule (1841-1920), Bishop of Durham

C. Anglo-Catholicism—the “high” church

1. The Oxford movement (“Tracts for the Times” [1833-41])

- a. High church aspects
- b. Continuity
- c. Apostolic succession
- d. Unity in doctrine
- e. Celibacy

2. John Henry Newman (1801-90)—*Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864)

II. The Nonconformists

A. The general situation

B. Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892)

1. Great preacher (“Old-Fashioned Wisdom from John Ploughman” and “Compel Them to Come In”)

“Memoirs of an Islet” [Earraid] by Robert Louis Stevenson: “And it was strange to see our Sabbath services, held, as they were, in one of the bothies [small huts], with Mr. Brebner reading at a table, and the congregation perched about in the double tier of sleeping bunks; and to hear the singing of the psalms, ‘the chapters,’ the inevitable Spurgeon’s sermon, and the old, eloquent lighthouse prayer.”

Helmut Thielicke (*Encounter with Spurgeon*): “I am almost tempted to shout out to those who are serving the eternal Word as preachers, and to those who are preparing to do so, in what I hope will be a productive hyperbole: sell all that you have (not least of all some of your stock of current sermonic literature) and buy Spurgeon...” (45).

2. Doctrinal preacher (*The Forgotten Spurgeon* by Iain Murray)

a. The Reformed faith

Spurgeon: “We brought out before the world the old Reformers’ doctrines, Calvinistic truth, Augustinian teaching, and Pauline dogma.”

b. The Protestant faith

Spurgeon: “I see this coming up everywhere—a belief in ceremony, a resting in ceremony, a veneration for altars, fonts, and Churches—a veneration so profound that we must not venture upon a remark, or straightway of sinners we are chief. Here is the essence and soul of Popery, peeping up under the garb of a decent respect for sacred things. It is impossible but that the Church of Rome must spread, when we who are watch-dogs of the fold are silent, and others are gently and smoothly turving the road, and making it as soft and smooth as possible, that converts may travel down to the nethermost hell of Popery. We want John Knox back again. Do not talk to me of mild and gentle men, of soft

manners and squeamish words, we want the fiery Knox, and even though his vehemence should ‘ding our pulpits into blads,’ it were well if he did but rouse our hearts to action.”

c. The evangelical faith (“The Downgrade Controversy”)

Spurgeon: “We used to debate upon particular and general redemption, but now men question whether there is any redemption at all worthy of the name.”

Questions from Class

What was the Roman Catholic Church doing at this time?

What is the most influential group in England today?

How did Newman deal with the doctrines of the Reformation?

For Further Study

A. Thomas Scott (1747-1821) was ordained in the Church of England before he became, according to his own testimony, a true Christian. In *The Force of Truth*, Scott describes the influences which God used to bring him to the new birth—the books he read, his theological study and meditation, and, above all, the friendship of John Newton. Although he had once insisted that he and Newton would never think alike until they were in heaven, Thomas Scott became an evangelical and a Calvinist.

In *The Force of Truth* (Banner of Truth, 1984), pages 80-90, Scott tells how he came to embrace “the doctrines of grace.” (The two authors that he mentions on page 85 are Joseph Hall [1574-1656] and John Reynolds [1549-1607]. Hall, bishop of Exeter and later of Norwich, represented the Church of England at the Synod of Dort in 1618. John Reynolds, Oxford scholar and a prominent Puritan, took part in the Hampton Court Conference of 1604 and in the production of the Authorized Version of the Bible [the King James Version]).

*What finally convinced Thomas Scott of the truth of the “doctrines of grace”?

*How did he then make use of them “for the consolation of poor, distressed, and fearful believers”?

*What surprising fact did Scott discover about the doctrine of “the old divines” of the Church of England?

*What did Scott learn from listening to the preaching of John Newton?

B. Read the “Preface” from *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* by Charles Simeon (Zondervan, 1956), xiv-xxii. The “Preface” introduces Charles Simeon’s “skeletons” (or outlines we would say) of sermons covering the whole Bible. These form a useful commentary on the Bible, especially for the preacher. Simeon quaintly states that “if the reader peruse one discourse every day of his life, the whole will occupy him exactly seven years.”

After discussing the preparation and delivery of sermons, Charles Simeon sets forth the principles that guided him in his preaching of doctrines such as God’s sovereignty and man’s free will.

*What do think of Simeon’s attempt to handle this subject?

*Do you believe that he is a Calvinist or an Arminian or neither?

(The illustration in the footnote on pages xvii and xviii concerns Charles Simeon himself and John Wesley.)

C. Through the efforts of evangelical Christians, especially William Wilberforce, freedom came to the slaves in the British Empire. Mr. S. O. Ebanks—native of Grand Cayman and long-time elder in the Boatswain Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA) in West Bay, Grand Cayman—in his history of the Cayman Islands provides a glimpse of the celebration that took place in Grand Cayman. As his account (“The Church Emerges”) reveals, festivities (planned by the slaves) lasted two days; the former masters and local dignitaries were invited and attended; and the Church of England minister was one of the speakers.

Personal note: The Boatswain Bay Presbyterian Church was organized in December 1958. Mr. Ebanks's history states on page 67: "Newlywed David Calhoun and his bride of one week arrived in June 1961. In spite of extreme heat and mosquitoes, the Lord blessed their work. Mrs. Calhoun led the youth choir and taught the children's Sunday School class. Mr. Calhoun, besides preaching at church services, held several cottage meetings in homes during their eight-week stay on the Island." The Golden Jubilee Service for the Boatswain Bay Sunday School (out of which grew the church) was held on November 23, 1980. Under the same sea grape tree where the first Sunday School met in 1930, the same teacher (Mr. Ebanks) gave the same lesson and the people (most of whom were present as children in 1930) sang the same hymns as they had done fifty years earlier." I went back to Cayman for this special service. In the picture Mr. Ebanks is standing behind the table and I am to his right.

D. Read the following pages from *Real Christianity Contrasted with the Prevailing Religious System* by William Wilberforce (Multnomah, 1982), 113-21. In the conclusion to his famous *Real Christianity*, William Wilberforce (on page 113) reviews what he has already said about "the religious system of the bulk of professing Christians" in Great Britain. What is his succinct one-sentence indictment?

- *Do you think that Wilberforce's "Practical Hints to Avoid Self-Deception" (section I) is helpful or does it encourage despondency or legalism? What is Wilberforce attempting to accomplish in this section?
- *In section II Wilberforce warns against being satisfied with "general Christianity." What does he mean by this?
- *How does Wilberforce appeal to the "absolute unbelievers" he addresses in section III? What does he say is the real cause of unbelief? Who are "half-believers"?
- *Does the author's suggestions in section IV have relevance for our times?
- *Is a book like this needed today? Why or why not? If it is needed, who would you like to see write it?

E. Read the sermon "Election No Discouragement to Seeking Souls" from *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* by Charles H. Spurgeon, vol. 10 (Pilgrim, 1969), 73-84. Charles Spurgeon began preaching at age seventeen, one year after his conversion. In 1854, at the age of nineteen, he became pastor of New Park Street Church in London, and within a short time was preaching to thousands of people every Sunday. He left 3563 sermons, of which this is one.

- *What does Spurgeon mean that "distinguishing grace finds out strange objects"?
- *Why, according to Spurgeon, has God so blessed the British Isles with the Gospel? What do think of his point here?
- *What is "the most convincing case" of God's sovereignty in salvation?
- *What is Spurgeon's main point or proposition in this sermon?
- *What are the objections to the doctrine of election that Spurgeon answers? Is he in your opinion successful?
- *How does he view the mysteries of the Bible?
- *How does the doctrine of election encourage the "awakened" sinner?
- *Does Spurgeon hold out any hope for what he calls "incorrigible" sinners?
- *How do you think Charles Simeon would have responded to this sermon by Charles Spurgeon?

F. Read the following selections from *Under the Greenwood Tree* by Thomas Hardy (Oxford, 1985), 59-61, 99-102. You will probably want to read the entire book. (It is interesting to note that at one time in his life Thomas Hardy was an evangelical.) Thomas Hardy's delightful novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* includes an entertaining account of a quire (choir) of musicians or church band, such as was common in England in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before being replaced by church organs and "an isolated organist."

In Hardy's story from his novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* the Mellstock Quire is out on Christmas Eve playing from house to house in the village. They have come to the school (where the school mistress lives)

and they play three numbers to an apparently empty house. Note the words of the hymn which Hardy says embodies “a quaint Christianity.” Later during “A Meeting of the Quire,” the members, meeting at Mr. Penney’s shoe-making establishment, dissect the minister’s sermon of the preceding day, “a very good guessable sermon,” as one of them puts it. That leads them to discuss the many (and dubious) changes that the new minister was attempting. The real problem is that the minister was thinking about replacing the band with an organ!

G. Read pages 240-45 from John Newton’s *Voice of the Heart (Cardiphonia)* (Moody, 1950). In addition to his sermons (see “The Small Success of the Gospel Ministry” when you become discouraged) and hymns (such as “Amazing Grace,” “Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken,” and “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds”), John Newton wrote many letters, some of which appeared in 1781 in a volume published under the name *Cardiphonia (Voice of the Heart)*. Alexander Whyte called Newton’s *Cardiphonia* “a volume of the purest apostolical and evangelical truth, written in a strong, clear, level, and idiomatic English style.”

Newton wrote seven letters to Mrs.— (the names of his correspondents are replaced by a space). We will read the first of these. He deals with a number of issues raised in her letter to him: How to behave toward those with whom we disagree, the importance of teaching all of the Scripture, his views of the Trinity and of Christ, the necessity of grace for salvation, and his desire for greater fervor. Notice the striking picture of “the work of grace in its first stages” at the close of his letter.

You will not find a more humble and more winsome Calvinist (nor Christian) than John Newton.