SPURGEON
AND THE POOR

How the Gospel Compels Christian Social Concern

Alex DiPrima

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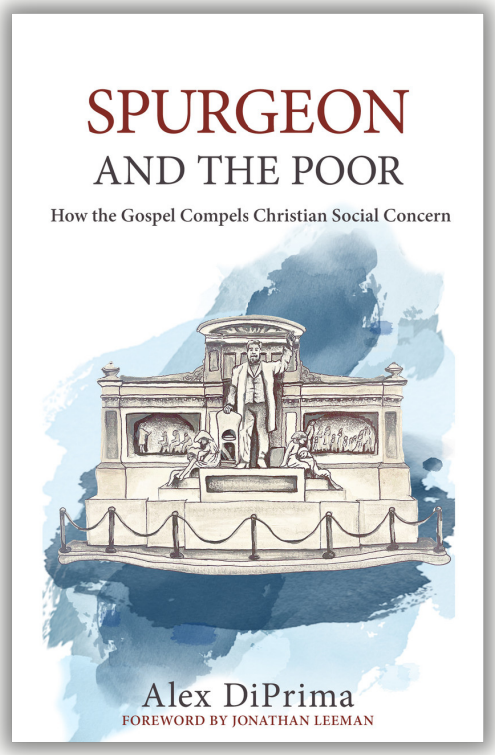

"No merciful man could forget the poor."
Charles Spurgeon

How should the people of God respond to social issues?
Alex DiPrima looks back to an unexpected source for answers: Prince of Preachers, Charles H.Spurgeon. DiPrima examines how Spurgeon's belief that gospel preaching should be the church's mission informed his benevolence and social concern.

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The Prince of Preachers

John B. Gough described Spurgeon's ministry as "a career thus far unparalleled in the history of ministers."[1] This achievement is evident nearly a century and a half after his death, but it appears that even those who observed Spurgeon's life as it unfolded were well aware they were witnessing something singular in Christian history. The first biography of Spurgeon appeared in print in 1856 when he was only twenty-one years old.[2] After Spurgeon died in 1892, a new biography of him surfaced every month for the next two years.[3] The tale of his storied ministry has instructed and inspired millions around the world and continues to attract both popular and scholarly attention today.[4]

In order to properly appreciate Spurgeon's views on Christian social concern, we first have to understand something of his basic story. This chapter provides a brief survey of Spurgeon's life, highlighting some of the major events and aspects of his ministry. This

1. John B. Gough, *Sunlight and Shadow; or, Gleanings from My Life Work* (Hartford, Conn.: A. D. Worthington, 1881), 407.

2. E. L. Magoon, *"The Modern Whitfield": Sermons of the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, of London; With an Introduction and Sketch of His Life* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, 1856).

3. Christian T. George, "Jesus Christ, the 'Prince of Pilgrims': A Critical Analysis of the Ontological, Functional, and Exegetical Christologies in the Sermons, Writings, and Lectures of Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892)" (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 2011), 18.

4. As this book was being written, there were more doctoral students studying Spurgeon's life, ministry, and theology than at any time since his death in 1892.

short account of Spurgeon's biography will supply us with context so that we can better understand the role that good works and mercy ministry played in Spurgeon's overall view of the Christian life and the ministry of the church.

Childhood and Conversion (1834–1850)

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was born on June 19, 1834, in Kelvedon, Essex, about fifty miles east of London. He was the oldest of seventeen children, only eight of whom survived infancy. Spurgeon's family was, for generations, part of England's rural working class. Spurgeon's father, John, earned a living as a clerk in a coal merchant's office and also served churches as a Congregationalist lay minister. His mother, Eliza, devoted herself to the spiritual nurture of her children and had a remarkable impact on Spurgeon's spiritual life as a child. Spurgeon once wrote of her, "I cannot tell how much I owe to the solemn words of my good mother.… I am sure that, in my early youth, no teaching ever made such an impression on my mind as the instruction of my mother."[5]

From the time he was eighteen months old until he was age six, Spurgeon lived with his grandparents in the village of Stambourne. The precise reason for the change of house is not known, but it likely had to do with his parents' slender means and growing family. Whatever the reason, it is not hard to trace God's hand of providence in these events. The years spent in his grandparents' home proved to be tremendously formative in shaping Spurgeon's earliest spiritual impressions.

His grandfather, James Spurgeon, who served as a Nonconformist minister for more than a half century, profoundly influenced the precocious young Charles. It was in his grandfather's study that Spurgeon first discovered Puritan classics, such as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's*

5. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography, Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records by His Wife and His Private Secretary* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1897), 1:67–69.

Progress, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, and Baxter's *Call to the Unconverted*. Like his grandfather, Spurgeon would remain a lifelong admirer of the Puritans. In light of how early Spurgeon began to encounter such works, it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that Spurgeon took in the theology of the Puritans with his mother's milk. Even the region of East Anglia where Spurgeon grew up was known as a true Puritan stronghold, populated as it was with old churches associated with well-known Puritans, such as John Rogers, John Owen, and William Gurnall.

By the time Spurgeon entered his teenage years, he had begun to wrestle intensely with what he described as "a deep and bitter sense of sin."[6] In his autobiography, compiled and published posthumously, Spurgeon chronicled a protracted internal struggle with doubt and fear over the state of his soul.[7] This internal wrestling persisted until January 1850, when the fifteen-year-old Spurgeon experienced the new birth. Historians dispute the exact date of this event. Spurgeon himself dated his conversion to January 6, 1850, but some scholars contend that he was mistaken about the date and was actually converted a week later, on January 13, 1850.[8]

The morning of his conversion, Spurgeon walked out of his parents' home (then in Colchester) to attend a nearby church, possibly to hear his father preach. He set out that morning in the midst of a terrible blizzard. He started to hike up the long hill lane leading to the church where he intended to worship that day. However, as conditions began to worsen, Spurgeon realized he needed to move

6. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 1:76.

7. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 1:75–96.

8. As Peter Morden notes, the reason some dispute Spurgeon's reckoning of the date of his conversion is that there is no record of a snowstorm in Colchester on January 6, 1850. However, there is a record of a snowstorm the following Sunday, January 13. Also, Robert Eaglen, the man who was widely believed to have preached the Isaiah 45:22 sermon that Sunday, was scheduled to preach on January 13 according to the Primitive Methodist circuit schedule. See Peter J. Morden, *Communion with Christ and His People: The Spirituality of C. H. Spurgeon* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 50–51.

quickly indoors. He decided to enter the local Primitive Methodist chapel on Artillery Street.

As Spurgeon recounted, the minister who was to preach that day was unable to make it due to the storm, so a poor man of little learning stepped up into the pulpit and began to preach in a lowly style with a humble country accent. His text was Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else." Spurgeon described the man's sermon, saying,

> Just fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said, "Young man, you look very miserable.… And you will always be miserable—miserable in life and miserable in death—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved." Then lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could do, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but look and live."… I saw at once the way of salvation.… There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him.[9]

And so it was, with a look to the Savior, that Spurgeon found new life in Christ. The verse from Isaiah 45:22 was one that Spurgeon returned to repeatedly throughout his ministry. He would go on to tell his conversion story countless times and often utilized it as the basis for his own evangelistic appeals to sinners.[10] The call of the Primitive Methodist preacher on that winter morning to "look to Jesus Christ" would one day become the central theme of Spurgeon's own ministry.

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9. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 1:106.

10. Eric Hayden has observed that Spurgeon gave an account of his conversion in every one of the fifty-six volumes of *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* and did so an average of five times per volume. Cited in Geoff Thomas, "The Conversion of Charles Haddon Spurgeon: January 6 1850," *Banner of Truth*, January 1, 2000, https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2000/the-conversion-of-charles-haddon-spurgeon-january-6-1850/.

Early Ministry in Cambridgeshire and Call to London (1850–1854)

Almost immediately after his conversion, Spurgeon began to evidence intense spiritual vitality. Many of his extant letters and diary entries from 1850 document his early spiritual formation and his fervent commitment to Christian work during this period. In a letter to his mother dated February 19, 1850, he wrote, "Oh, how I wish that I could do something for Christ!"[11] Mark Hopkins notes how quickly Spurgeon began to devote himself to various forms of Christian activity in the days following his conversion:

> Spurgeon lost no time in channelling this rush of spiritual life into practical Christian commitment and work. By February 1850 he was distributing tracts, in April he was admitted to church membership, in May he was baptized by immersion (in accordance with convictions arrived at before his conversion) and began teaching a Sunday school class, and by June he was visiting seventy people regularly on Saturdays to converse on spiritual things. He started lay preaching soon after moving to Cambridge…and began his first ministry a year later in the nearby village of Waterbeach when only seventeen.[12]

Spurgeon's zeal as a new believer erupted and overflowed into numerous avenues of ministry. Of this early phase of his Christian experience, George Needham wrote, "Having thus publicly devoted himself to the service of God, he was more earnest than ever.… He was instant in season, and indeed, seldom out of season, in his efforts to do good."[13]

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11. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 1:118.

12. Mark Hopkins, *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation: Evangelical and Liberal Theologies in Victorian England* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 127.

13. George Needham, *The Life and Labors of Charles H. Spurgeon: The Faithful Preacher, the Devoted Pastor, the Noble Philanthropist, the Beloved College President, and the Voluminous Writer, Author, Etc., Etc.* (Boston, Mass.: D. L. Guernsey, 1887), 41.

Spurgeon began to preach at the age of sixteen for the local Cambridge lay preachers' association. He preached his first sermons in cottages, in barns, and in the open air. By the time the small congregation in the rural village of Waterbeach called Spurgeon to be their pastor in the autumn of 1851, he had already developed a reputation in the surrounding region as a dynamic preacher. Upon taking up his first ministerial charge at the age of seventeen, Spurgeon immediately adopted a busy pastoral schedule, preaching frequently and carrying on a regular regiment of pastoral visitation from house to house. Hopkins writes, "His success was immediate and immense."[14] The village warmly received the ministry of their young pastor, and he became something of a local legend as the church speedily grew from forty to over four hundred members.[15] Before long, fabled accounts of the teenage preacher began to spread far and wide.

Spurgeon's pastorate at Waterbeach would be brief and ultimately preparatory for a larger sphere of ministry that the "boy preacher of the Fens" could not possibly have anticipated. After only eighteen months at Waterbeach, in January 1854, Spurgeon received a call to pastor one of London's most eminent Baptist congregations in New Park Street, Southwark. Three venerable Baptist theologians—Benjamin Keach, John Gill, and John Rippon—had previously pastored the church for one and a half centuries. Yet the church's greatest days lay ahead as Spurgeon would go on over the next four decades to draw larger crowds than not only his predecessors but any other preacher in the Christian world of his day.[16]

14. Hopkins, *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation*, 127.

15. H. L. Wayland, *Charles H. Spurgeon: His Faith and Works* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1892), 26; Peter J. Morden, *C. H. Spurgeon: The People's Preacher* (Farnham, U.K.: CWR, 2009), 44; Eric W. Hayden, *Highlights in the Life of C. H. Spurgeon* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1990), 2.

16. Hayden, *Highlights*, 17.

New Park Street Chapel: Early Success, Criticism, and Adversity (1854–1860)

Immediately after Spurgeon embarked upon his new pastorate at New Park Street, the church started to grow by the hundreds. It was not long before they began to explore options for how to accommodate better the large crowds that came to hear Spurgeon preach. This effort led the church to rent larger venues, including Exeter Hall and later the newly erected Surrey Gardens Music Hall, while they worked to build a more permanent location in South London.

As Spurgeon's profile grew, so did criticism of him in the popular religious press of the day. Many of his critics seemed to view his ministry as sensational at best and superficial at worst.[17] Biographer Peter Morden writes, "Spurgeon, [the newspapers] said, was like a comet which blazed across the sky—he would burn brightly for a while but would disappear just as quickly as he had appeared."[18] Certainly, Spurgeon's youth, his unconventional preaching style, and his willingness to use secular venues for his services contributed to the press's portrayal of him as a sort of nine days' wonder. Steady criticism persisted through the mid-1850s but tended to die down as it became increasingly evident that Spurgeon's ministry had staying power.

It was during these years that Spurgeon met, courted, and married Susannah Thompson.[19] Within the first year of their marriage, Susannah gave birth to twin boys, Thomas and Charles, who would both go on to be ministers themselves.[20] By all accounts, the Spurgeons enjoyed a wonderful and happy marriage, though one marked

17. For examples and excerpts of criticism of Spurgeon by the religious press of his day, see *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 2:33–61. However, not all coverage of Spurgeon was negative; see *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 2:63–80.

18. Morden, *C. H. Spurgeon*, 55.

19. For more on the Spurgeons' marriage, see Ray Rhodes Jr., *Yours, till Heaven: The Untold Love Story of Charles and Susie Spurgeon* (Chicago: Moody, 2021).

20. Charles Jr. pastored South Street Baptist Church in Greenwich, London, while Thomas pastored first in Auckland, New Zealand, before succeeding his father at the Metropolitan Tabernacle from 1894 to 1908.

by considerable trials of poor health. Susannah, for her part, was essentially an invalid who spent most of their married life at home.[21] As for Spurgeon himself, he suffered greatly for much of his adult life from rheumatic gout and chronic kidney problems (later diagnosed as Bright's disease). By the time he reached his forties, Spurgeon had begun regularly to experience protracted seasons of ill health that often required him to be out of the pulpit for months at a time.[22]

Poor health was not the only trial that the Spurgeons endured together. Not even a year after they married, Spurgeon experienced one of the greatest tragedies of his life. On October 19, 1856, Spurgeon preached his first service at the newly rented Surrey Gardens Music Hall. Many criticized the decision to rent the hall, including some of the members of the New Park Street Chapel.[23] Some viewed it as extravagant to rent such a large venue, and others saw it as sacrilegious to make use of a space that hosted secular concerts and events during the week. Undaunted by his critics, Spurgeon went forward with securing the venue, believing it to provide a significant opportunity to proclaim the gospel to a wider audience. As Spurgeon was preaching on the night of the first service, someone in the crowd raised a false alarm by shouting, "Fire!" Mass confusion ensued. As many tried to flee the venue, a stairwell collapsed, and seven people were trampled to death, with many more injured. The tragedy left an indelible mark on Spurgeon's psyche, and he later referred to the experience as "a night which time will never erase from my memory."[24]

The episode at the Surrey Gardens Music Hall notwithstanding, Spurgeon experienced extraordinary fruitfulness in his ministry during the late 1850s. His church grew by hundreds of new mem-

21. The details of her condition are largely unknown, except that she underwent a fairly serious operation by one of England's leading obstetricians in 1868; see Ray Rhodes Jr., *Susie: The Life and Legacy of Susannah Spurgeon, Wife of Charles H. Spurgeon* (Chicago: Moody, 2018), 125–30.

22. Morden, *Communion with Christ*, 259.

23. Morden, *C. H. Spurgeon*, 67–68.

24. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 2:195.

bers each year, and he eventually began raising funds to erect a new building that could accommodate his burgeoning congregation. Spurgeon also founded the Pastors' College during these years. This training center for ministers would end up being one of his foremost institutions, and he served as its president and one of the lecturers. Kenneth Brown estimated that by Spurgeon's death in 1892, over 20 percent of all the Baptist ministers in England and Wales had trained at the Pastors' College.[25] Through this considerable alumni base and an annual conference the college held, Spurgeon developed a close-knit network of like-minded pastors all over England.

It is hard to overstate just how significant the Pastors' College was to Spurgeon's life and ministry. One of his biographers quotes him as saying of the college, "This is my life's work, to which I believe God has called me."[26] David Gracey, principal of the college from 1881 to 1893, said that "the Pastors' College was the first of [Spurgeon's] philanthropic institutions" and the one that was "dearest to his heart."[27] During Spurgeon's lifetime, the Pastors' College trained nearly nine hundred men, and its graduates planted nearly two hundred new churches in Britain alone.[28] We will consider the Pastors' College in greater depth in chapter 8.

The Metropolitan Tabernacle: Sustained Success, Expansion, and Writing (1861–1887)

On March 25, 1861, Spurgeon preached his first sermon in the newly erected Metropolitan Tabernacle near the Elephant and Castle station in South London. He began his sermon with these words,

25. Kenneth D. Brown, *A Social History of the Nonconformist Ministry in England and Wales 1800–1930* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 33, 98.

26. W. Y. Fullerton, *C. H. Spurgeon: A Biography* (London: William and Norgate, 1920), 227.

27. David Gracey, "Mr. Spurgeon's First Institution," *Sword and the Trowel*, June 1892, 277.

28. Eric W. Hayden, *A History of Spurgeon's Tabernacle* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1971), 18; Morden, *C. H. Spurgeon*, 151; Mike Nicholls, *C. H. Spurgeon: The Pastor Evangelist* (Didcot, U.K.: Baptist Historical Society, 1992), 175–77.

> I would propose that the subject of the ministry of this house, as long as this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshippers, shall be the person of Jesus Christ. I am never ashamed to avow myself a Calvinist…. I do not hesitate to take the name of Baptist…. But if I am asked to say what is my creed, I think I must reply—"It is Jesus Christ."[29]

Spurgeon would preach Christ from this pulpit weekly to crowds of over six thousand on Sundays in both the morning and the evening for the next thirty years. The Metropolitan Tabernacle also became the center for many of Spurgeon's benevolent ministries. As has already been noted, by 1884, the list of active ministries operating out of the Tabernacle numbered sixty-six. These ministries engaged a vast array of material, social, and economic needs.[30] Spurgeon himself either founded, chaired, or financially supported many of these institutions. One of the foremost of these benevolent ministries was the Stockwell Orphanage, founded in 1867. The orphanage housed roughly five hundred orphans at any given time and provided care of the highest quality. Spurgeon frequently visited the orphanage and would often spend his Christmas mornings with the children who, as he said, "compassed me about like bees."[31] We will learn more about the Stockwell Orphanage as well in chapter 9.

The Tabernacle membership grew in almost every year of Spurgeon's tenure as pastor. Over his thirty-eight years in London, Spurgeon saw the church grow from 232 members when he first arrived in 1854 to 5,311 in 1892.[32] Altogether, 14,461 people became members during his ministry, an average of more than 1 person

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29. C. H. Spurgeon, "The First Sermon in the Tabernacle," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised by C. H. Spurgeon* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1969), 7:169.

30. Spurgeon, "Mr. Spurgeon's Jubilee Meetings," *Sword and the Trowel*, July 1884, 373.

31. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 3:179.

32. Figures recorded in the annual membership roles in the archives of Metropolitan Tabernacle in London.

per day.[33] This sort of sustained growth was without precedent in Spurgeon's era. His power to draw large crowds was only exceeded by his ability to keep them, and he did so for nearly four decades.

Spurgeon's publishing career became more prolific during this period as well. One facet of this was the weekly publication of his sermons, a routine he began while at New Park Street.[34] These sermons achieved a consistent weekly readership of twenty-five thousand in Spurgeon's day.[35] In 1865, Spurgeon also began publishing a monthly magazine, the *Sword and the Trowel*, which, by 1871, reached a regular circulation of fifteen thousand.[36] And it was in these years that Spurgeon published some of his most famous books, including *John Ploughman's Talk*, *Morning by Morning*, *Evening by Evening*, and his magnum opus, *The Treasury of David*, which was a popular commentary on the Psalms.[37]

The Downgrade Controversy and Final Days (1887–1892)

In his final years, Spurgeon found himself embroiled in the most intense controversy of his life. What has come to be known as the Downgrade Controversy began in 1887 with a series of articles published in the *Sword and the Trowel*. Spurgeon detected what he

33. Hopkins, *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation*, 155.

34. These sermons are now contained in sixty-three volumes as *The New Park Street Pulpit: Containing Sermons Preached and Revised by the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, Minister of the Chapel,* 6 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007) and *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised by C. H. Spurgeon*, Vols. 7–62 (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1969–90).

35. Hopkins, *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation*, 154; Spurgeon, "To You," *Sword and the Trowel*, January 1871, 1–3.

36. Spurgeon, "To You," 3.

37. C. H. Spurgeon, *John Ploughman's Talk or Plain Talk for Plain People* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, n.d.); Spurgeon, *Morning by Morning: Or, Daily Readings for the Family or the Closet* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1865); Spurgeon, *Evening by Evening: Or, Readings at Eventide for the Family or the Closet* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1868); Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Containing an Original Exposition of the Book of Psalms; A Collection of Illustrative Extracts from the Whole Range of Literature; A Series of Homiletical Hints upon Almost Every Verse; And List of Writers upon Each Psalm*, 7 vols. (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1869–85).

considered to be a disturbing downgrade in the theological convictions among Baptists on crucial doctrines such as the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture, the necessity and substitutionary nature of the atonement, and the existence and eternality of hell.[38] The controversy pitted Spurgeon against Baptist Union leadership who believed that Spurgeon's claims were largely unfounded. As Spurgeon gradually realized that his concerns were not widely shared among his opponents and that the prospects for reform were grim, he chose to resign from the Baptist Union. After receiving his resignation in early 1888, the Baptist Union responded by censuring Spurgeon for what they regarded as divisive behavior. This was a tough blow for Spurgeon, made all the more bitter by his failure to receive broad support from many of his friends and former students.

Spurgeon believed to his death that he was warranted in his stand against what he perceived as doctrinal decline among the Baptists of his day. Reflecting on the conflict, he said, "I am quite willing to be eaten of dogs for the next fifty years, but the more distant future shall vindicate me."[39] With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that Spurgeon's assessment has proved true. Though he felt assured that his stand was right, he nonetheless suffered deep discouragement over the controversy. Susannah described the affair as the "deepest grief of his noble life," and she suggested that the Downgrade Controversy contributed to his premature death at the age of fifty-seven.[40]

Spurgeon spent his last days in relative peace in Mentone, France, which was a regular retreat site for him and his associates. He died there at the Hotel Beau Rivage on January 31, 1892, of kidney complications. A week later, the Metropolitan Tabernacle held a series of

38. Hopkins, *Nonconformity's Romantic Generation*, 234. See also Spurgeon, "Our Reply to Sundry Critics and Enquirers," *Sword and the Trowel*, September 1887, 465, where Spurgeon writes, "We cannot hold the inspiration of the Word, and yet reject it; we cannot believe in the atonement and deny it;… we cannot recognize the punishment of the impenitent and yet indulge the 'larger hope.'"

39. Spurgeon, "The Preacher's Power, and the Conditions of Obtaining It," *Sword and the Trowel*, August 1889, 420.

40. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 4:255.

memorial services, and on February 11, 1892, Spurgeon was finally laid to rest in West Norwood Cemetery, London. Observers estimated that more than one hundred thousand people attended these services.[41] Today, hundreds still visit his grave each year. At the foot of the grave is a sculpture of a Bible opened to 2 Timothy 4:7–8, which reads, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

Legacy

Spurgeon's career was remarkable by any measure. In his many endeavors, such as preaching, pastoral training, church planting, publishing, and mercy ministry, he experienced ministerial fruitfulness to an unprecedented degree. Though it has been well over a century since his death, Spurgeon's sermons and other writings are still tremendously popular in the twenty-first century among evangelicals of all stripes. Christians across the globe still admire and appreciate Spurgeon's legacy. Three particular aspects of this legacy stand out for further comment.

Without question, Spurgeon's legacy shines most brightly today *in his printed sermons.* There are nearly four thousand of his sermons currently in print, and they are still tremendously popular among Christians all over the world. They have been published in a host of different collections and editions, and most of them are available free online. Their popular appeal is due, in part, to Spurgeon's singular command of the English language. President John F. Kennedy famously said of Winston Churchill, "He mobilized the English language and sent it into battle." It might be said of Spurgeon that he mobilized the English language and sent it to church. Spurgeon admired many of England's greatest poets, playwrights, and authors.

41. J. C. Carlile, *C. H. Spurgeon: An Interpretive Biography* (London: Kingsgate, 1933), 11.

He owned a complete set of Dickens's works, enjoyed the poetry of Wordsworth and Tennyson, and could recite long portions of Shakespeare from memory.[42] His mind was well stocked with muscular vocabulary and poignant metaphors, which he skillfully marshaled to capture the doctrines of the Bible, the beauty of the gospel, and the breadth of Christian experience.

The warmth, depth, and richness of even his earliest sermons give testimony to a preaching brilliance that is hard to account for by any natural explanations. God's anointing was plainly upon the minister and the message. Though he lacked a college degree and any formal training whatsoever, Spurgeon was nonetheless able to draw five-figure crowds in his early twenties. Yet he was no flash in the pan. His preaching had staying power and carried whole generations of his hearers for decades. Today, volumes of his sermons line the bookshelves not only of ministers but of ordinary Christians across the globe. Spurgeon's sermons are read by more people today than at any time during his life, and it is these sermons more than anything else that have kept his legacy alive well into the twenty-first century.

I have enjoyed the opportunity of talking to countless Christians who are familiar with the sermons of Charles Spurgeon. I often ask them to identify the quality or characteristic of these sermons that they find most personally and spiritually helpful. Answers vary, but they almost always will cite something related to Spurgeon's preeminent focus on the person and work of Christ. In his preaching, Spurgeon exuded something of the posture and disposition of the Lord Jesus toward sinners, and he did this in a way that brought the reality of the grace and mercy of God to his audience with profound existential power. Simply put, Spurgeon's sermons brought Christ to the hearer. One of the reasons his sermons remain so popular today

42. Readers interested in seeing Spurgeon's personal collection of Dickens along with several other classic works can find them on display at the Spurgeon Library on the campus of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri.

is because they have so much of Jesus in them, emanating His love for needy sinners.

Spurgeon's legacy also continues today *through his published books.* Spurgeon wrote nearly 150 books, most of them directed to a popular Christian readership. Though some of his books have faded with time, many are still widely read by Christians today. Among the most popular of Spurgeon's books are his devotional classics such as *Morning and Evening*, his commentaries such as *The Treasury of David*, and his books on the Christian life such as *All of Grace*. Many students of preaching and pastoral theology still make use of Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*, as well as his pastors' conference addresses recorded in *An All-Round Ministry.* Many of these books are more popular than ever and are enjoying a far wider and more diverse readership than at any other time in history.

A third prominent aspect of Spurgeon's legacy is simply *his faithful example as a preacher, pastor, and church leader*. Spurgeon's story continues to instruct and edify pastors and other Christians in a myriad of ways. Many preachers have appreciated and imitated the profound christocentrism of Spurgeon's preaching, with its focus on the person and work of Christ and an emphasis on the universal call of the gospel. Many Christians have found much to applaud in Spurgeon's catholicity, both in his private friendships and in the fellowship he shared among other churches. Others still have derived help and comfort from Spurgeon's perseverance through suffering of various kinds, whether it be his internal struggles with depression, his trials of ill health, or his experiences of unjust criticism. Spurgeon's steadfast endurance through the hardships of life and ministry has inspired many Christians to persevere through their own trials.

Spurgeon's legacy has blessed and instructed millions over the years and speaks more loudly than ever to Christians today. However, though Spurgeon is so well known and so widely beloved, his work in benevolence and social activism is lesser known and, thus, underappreciated. Yet these burdens occupied much of his attention and played a substantial part in his overall ministry. My hope is that

through the chapters that follow, Christians will come to appreciate, and even better still, imitate Spurgeon's example in his eager care and concern for the poor and the needy. We begin with a consideration of his teaching on this vital subject.

2

The Grace Effect

Charles Spurgeon was an eager student of church history. He read deeply in the Reformers, especially Luther and Calvin, and greatly admired the Puritans, who occupied a special place in both his heart and library. His appreciation for the Puritans began in his grandfather's study, where he first pored over the massive, age-worn folio volumes of the works of Puritan giants such as Owen, Bunyan, and Baxter. Eventually, Spurgeon came to possess his own copies of such volumes, and by the end of his life, he boasted one of the largest Puritan libraries in the world. He took great pride in the Reformed and "puritanic" theology taught in his Pastors' College.[1] The great prime minister, and Spurgeon's personal friend, William Gladstone famously referred to Spurgeon as the "last of the Puritans."[2] As a Baptist, Spurgeon saw himself squarely in the Particular Baptist tradition, even republishing the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith with his own preface in 1855 shortly after arriving at New Park Street.[3] From the outset of his career in London, he made it clear

1. See *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography, Compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records by His Wife and His Private Secretary* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1898), 2:149; Spurgeon, "College and Orphanage," *Sword and the Trowel*, March 1881, 133; and W. Y. Fullerton, *C. H. Spurgeon: A Biography* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1920), 235.

2. Christian T. George, "A Man behind His Time," in *The Lost Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon: His Earliest Outlines and Sermons Between 1851 and 1854*, ed. Christian T. George (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 1:18.

3. *Thirty-Two Articles of Christian Faith and Practice; or, Baptist Confession of Faith, with Scripture Proofs, Adopted by the Ministers and Messengers of the General*

that his ministry would be distinctly Reformed, trumpeting the doctrines of grace and the great *solas* of the Reformation.

However, though Spurgeon embraced Reformed and Baptist distinctives, he loved most of all to preach basic evangelical doctrines such as the necessity of the atonement, the authority of the Bible, and the priority of the new birth. This latter doctrine was a favorite subject of George Whitefield, the foremost preacher of the evangelical movement. Whitefield preached on the new birth hundreds of times and famously said, "It is the very hinge on which the salvation of each of us turns, and a point too in which all sincere Christians, of whatever denomination, agree."[4] For Spurgeon's part, he referred to Whitefield as his chief model and said that he endeavored to "follow his glorious track."[5] Throughout his lifetime, Spurgeon was often compared to Whitefield.[6] This comparison emerged almost immediately after Spurgeon entered the public view, as the first biography of Spurgeon, published when he was just twenty-one years old, was titled *"The Modern Whitfield": Sermons of the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon*.[7]

Just as the theme of the new birth was prominent in Whitefield's preaching and that of other early evangelical preachers, so it was in Spurgeon's ministry as well. And just as the early evangelical movement's preaching of the new birth led to an explosion of benevolent and charitable activity in Britain, so it did in Spurgeon's ministry. Indeed, Spurgeon believed that one of the effects of the new birth was that it transforms the individual sinner into a purveyor of mercy. Those who experience the grace and compassion of Christ through

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Assembly, Which Met in London in 1689, with a Preface by the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1855).

4. George Whitefield, *The Nature and Necessity of Our New Birth in Christ Jesus, in Order of Salvation: A Sermon Preached in the Church of St. Mary Radcliffe in Bristol* (London, 1738), 1.

5. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 2:66.

6. *C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography*, 2:47, 66, 104–5.

7. E. L. Magoon, *"The Modern Whitfield": Sermons of the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, of London; with an Introduction and Sketch of His Life* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, 1856).

regeneration will themselves become gracious and compassionate toward others.

The New Birth and Concern for the Poor

The new birth factored prominently in Spurgeon's preaching on the priority of good works of benevolence and mercy. He strongly believed that the experience of divine grace in the heart should lead to the expression of Christian grace toward others, especially those in need. Thus, Spurgeon maintained that genuine compassion and sympathy for the poor are marks of true conversion. He believed that all Christians should exhibit practical expressions of benevolence and charity toward others that prove their authenticity as true believers. Spurgeon exhorted his congregation, saying, "Called with a nobler calling, let us exhibit as the result of our regenerate nature a loftier compassion for the suffering sons of men."[8]

Spurgeon was not surprised if a stranger to God's saving grace disregarded the poor. He thought it would be consistent with a sinful nature for people to think primarily of themselves and be generally indifferent to the needs of others. However, he believed the new birth brings about genuine heart transformation that produces a host of new attitudes and dispositions, including a heightened concern for the poor. He viewed a Christian without compassion for the needy as a walking contradiction. Spurgeon argued, "Sympathy is especially a Christian duty. Consider what the Christian is, and you will say that if every other man were selfish he should be disinterested; if there were nowhere else a heart that had sympathy for the needy there should be one found in every Christian breast."[9]

It is important to understand that Spurgeon did not view Christian charity as the province of a special subset of Christians. Rather, he believed that every Christian, by virtue of his regenerate nature,

8. C. H. Spurgeon, "Christian Sympathy," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised by C. H. Spurgeon* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1969), 8:627.

9. Spurgeon, "Christian Sympathy," 8:627.

should love his fellow men and labor for their welfare. "Love," Spurgeon said, "should shine throughout the Christian character."[10] Love is the sine qua non of true Christian piety. Moreover, Spurgeon believed love for the needy, in particular, is a distinctive mark of a renewed nature. In a sermon preached in 1873 from Jesus's words in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy," Spurgeon said, "No merciful man could forget the poor. He who passed by their ills without sympathy and saw their suffering without relieving them, might prate as he would about inward Grace, but Divine Grace in his heart there could not be! The Lord does not acknowledge as of His family one who can see his brother has needs and shuts up 'his heart of compassion from him.' The apostle John rightly asks, 'How dwells the love of God in him?' No, the truly merciful are considerate of those who are poor."[11] In the above quotation, Spurgeon strongly stated his belief in a correlation between the experience of divine grace in the heart and the commensurate character of life that shows itself in mercy and compassion toward the poor. In other words, Spurgeon believed true conversion inevitably leads to the exercise of Christian charity. Thus, he understood sympathy for the poor as a litmus test for true saving faith.

Spurgeon frequently stressed that one of the results of regeneration is authentic love for one's neighbor, including love for the poor and needy. In 1876, he said, "If Christ has saved you, he will save you from being selfish. You will love your fellow men; you will desire to do them good. You will endeavor to help the poor; you will try to instruct the ignorant. He who truly becomes a Christian becomes in that very same day a practical philanthropist. No man is a true Christian who is un-Christlike.... The true Christian lives for others: in a word, he lives for Christ."[12] The new birth brings about a fundamentally new nature, with love toward others as one of its principal

10. Spurgeon, "The Good Samaritan," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 23:350.
11. Spurgeon, "The Fifth Beatitude," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 55:400.
12. Spurgeon, "Aeneas," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 22:539.

qualities. Spurgeon thus believed that one of the surest signs of the new birth is genuine love for one's fellow men.

A Warning to the Cold-Hearted

Spurgeon reserved the sternest words for professing Christians who show little regard for the needs of the poor. He viewed indifference toward the needy as sub-Christian, something utterly alien to an authentic profession of faith. Spurgeon feared that some in his large congregation in London possessed this type of indifference.[13] He often sought to bring such people to conviction through severe warnings. The following admonition from an 1866 sermon is emblematic of the sort of rebuke Spurgeon would issue to such people:

> You may talk about your religion till you have worn your tongue out, and you may get others to believe you; and you may remain in the Church twenty years, and nobody ever detect you in anything like an inconsistency; but, if it be in your power, and you do nothing to relieve the necessities of the poor members of Christ's body, you will be damned as surely as if you were drunkards or whoremongers. If you have no care for God's Church this text applies to you, and will as surely sink you to the lowest hell as if you had been common blasphemers.[14]

Spurgeon did not mince words. He believed a person truly acquainted with the saving grace of God could never close his heart to the needy.

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13. Spurgeon's congregation drew heavily from the working class of London and was thus predominately lower-middle class in social distribution, though he did attract some among the poor of London. See Joseph S. Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 130–31; Patricia Stallings Kruppa, *Charles Haddon Spurgeon: A Preacher's Progress* (New York: Garland, 1982), 134–38, 496–97. Generally speaking, the social location of the Tabernacle membership was in keeping with trends among Victorian Baptists. See Hugh McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London: Croom Helm, 1974), 69–70; and J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot, U.K.: Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 3:268–78.

14. Spurgeon, "The Reward of the Righteous," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 12:46.

In this particular sermon, Spurgeon sought to convince professing Christians not to neglect the needs of others within the body of Christ. Christians should have a special regard for their brothers and sisters in the family of God. Spurgeon embraced the words of the apostle Paul from Galatians 6:10: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." However, Spurgeon did not believe Christians should limit their charity to those within the church alone. He argued, "The Christian's sympathy should ever be of the widest character."[15] Spurgeon described Christian sympathy as a "precious stone of love" cast into the "crystal pool of a renewed heart." This stone of love should generate "ever-widening circles of sympathy." The first ring is the Christian's household. The second is the household of faith, namely the church. Spurgeon then said, "Look once more, for the ever-widening ring has reached the very limit of the lake, and included all men in its area."[16] Indeed, in Spurgeon's mind, there ought to be no limit to the sphere of Christian love. Surely members of the Lord's family have special priority for the believer, but Christian love must nonetheless extend beyond the church to include all members of the human family.

Spurgeon believed that benevolence and good works are essential to the Christian life by virtue of the new birth. Just as a good tree bears good fruit, so too Christian faith ought to result in love for the poor and regard for the needy. In one of his most concise and lucid statements on this subject, cited earlier in this book, Spurgeon said, "To me, a follower of Jesus means a friend of man. A Christian is a philanthropist by profession, and generous by force of grace; wide as the reign of sorrow is the stretch of his love, and where he cannot help he pities still."[17] He went on to say, "Time was when, wherever a man met a Christian he met a helper. 'I shall starve!' said he, until

15. Spurgeon, "Christian Sympathy," 8:628.
16. Spurgeon, "Christian Sympathy," 8:628.
17. Spurgeon, "Christian Sympathy," 8:628.

he saw a Christian's face, and then he said, 'Now shall I be aided.'"[18] Spurgeon believed that every Christian is, in some sense, a philanthropist. This did not mean, as in the modern sense of the word, that every Christian gives large sums of money to aid the poor (though some are certainly called to this). However, it did mean that every Christian should naturally be disposed to show compassion toward the poor and should seek, as opportunity affords, practical steps to relieve human oppression, suffering, and need. Spurgeon understood this to be the product of the new birth. "Where God has given a man a new heart and a right spirit," he said, "there is great tenderness to all the poor."[19]

A Call to All Christians

We must appreciate just how universal Spurgeon understood this call to Christian compassion for the poor and needy to be. He did not see this as optional or preferable but as essential and fundamental to regenerate humanity. He believed that the call to Christian social concern is not limited to the privileged few or to a small number of individuals who felt uniquely called. Rather, the call to Christian concern for the needy is part of the call to basic discipleship. Every Christian, Spurgeon believed, should have a heart of compassion and love for the poor and the destitute. Love for needy neighbors is part of the very fabric of the Christian life.

Of course, Spurgeon believed compassion and concern for the needy ought to produce action on their behalf. He once said, "I would rather create an ounce of help than a ton of theory."[20] He urged Christians to devote themselves to practical service as they have opportunity. This was clearly the expectation he had for his congregants, as he said, "Every member who joins my church

18. Spurgeon, "Christian Sympathy," 8:634.

19. Spurgeon, "Fifth Beatitude," 55:400.

20. Spurgeon, "The Blind Man's Eyes Opened; or, Practical Christianity," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 29:677.

is expected to do something for his fellow creatures."[21] Writing in 1933, one of Spurgeon's biographers and former students, J. C. Carlile, summarized, "What is now familiarly known as Social Service, from Spurgeon's point of view, was the ordinary expression of Christian character."[22] This is not to say that Spurgeon was an advocate of large-scale government-sponsored social welfare. However, it is to say that Spurgeon believed there is a special burden on Christians to care for the poor by nature of their new birth. Practical care and concern for the needy, the afflicted, and the oppressed ought to be natural to the Christian by virtue of regeneration.

Spurgeon enjoined every true Christian to practical ministry among the poor and afflicted with the utmost urgency, saying, "Now learn this lesson, all ye followers of Christ. Whenever you see suffering, I hope you will each one feel 'I must work, I must help.' Whenever you witness poverty, whenever you behold vice, say to yourself, 'I must work, I must work.' If you are worthy of the Christ whom you call leader, let all the necessities of men impel you, compel you, constrain you to be blessing them."[23] The widespread suffering of men and women ought to drive Christians to labor on their behalf. Spurgeon would not allow his hearers to satisfy themselves with rote adherence to religious forms. It is not enough to participate in church services and apprehend sound preaching. Nor is it sufficient to develop mere sympathies and burdens for those in need. Compassion has to melt into action. Spurgeon went on to say, "Oh that I could lay my hand—or, better far, that my Master would lay his pierced hand on every true Christian here and press it upon him until he cried out, 'I cannot sit here. I must be at work as soon as this

21. Eric W. Hayden, *A Centennial History of Spurgeon's Tabernacle* (London: Clifford Frost, 1962), 80.

22. J. C. Carlile, *C. H. Spurgeon: An Interpretive Biography* (London: Kingsgate, 1933), 228.

23. Spurgeon, "Blind Man's Eyes Opened," 29:682.

service is done. I must not only hear, and give, and pray, but I must also work.'"[24]

Spurgeon often referred to the Metropolitan Tabernacle as a "working church."[25] The members of the congregation embraced this identity. It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to calculate with precision the number of volunteers required to sustain the many ministries, missions, classes, societies, and institutions that operated out of the Tabernacle. William Olney, one of Spurgeon's deacons, speculated that the number of members who were out conducting meetings of various kinds among the poor of London on Sunday evenings was at least one thousand.[26] The wide-ranging and multifaceted work of the church could not have succeeded as it did without a high degree of volunteer recruitment and coordination. Spurgeon expected all the church's members to engage in this kind of Christian work. Spurgeon's contemporary Charles Booth, in his famous sociological study of the London poor, commented, "Such was the power [Spurgeon] exercised that, as one admirer phrases it, 'you could not hear him without saying, What can I do for Jesus?'"[27]

A Needed Word for the Church

Christians today have tended to neglect Spurgeon's teaching on the relationship between the new birth and how Christians relate to the needy, with detrimental consequences for the church. Failure to understand how the new birth affects our view of the afflicted and the disenfranchised will not only stymie otherwise healthy efforts to

24. Spurgeon, "Blind Man's Eyes Opened," 29:682.

25. For examples, see Spurgeon, "The Arrows of the Lord's Deliverance," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 10:276; Spurgeon, "A Bright Light in Deep Shades," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 18:274; Spurgeon, "A Plea for the Pastors' College," *Sword and the Trowel*, June 1875, 253; Spurgeon, *Annual Report of the Stockwell Orphanage for Fatherless Boys* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1879), 16.

26. Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 159.

27. Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in Londo*n, 3rd ser., vol. 4, *Religious Influences, Inner South London* (London: Macmillan, 1902), 74.

promote benevolence and mercy ministry but will also cripple the church's witness. Spurgeon preached a new birth that produces compelling mercy and love toward those in need, spilling over into works of charity and benevolence. These works not only provided aid and relief to thousands but also set forth a striking witness to the power of the gospel to change people and make them truly new.

Spurgeon's teaching on this subject presents us with several valuable lessons. Foremost among them is the idea that Christians should not view care for the needy as merely optional or preferable for the believer but as basic and essential to the new nature produced by regeneration. This is a manifestly biblical idea (e.g., Titus 2:14; 3:3–8, 14; James 1:27; 1 John 3:16–18). Experiencing God's kindness, compassion, and mercy ought to transform people. The new birth causes selfish and self-absorbed sinners to become loving toward their neighbors, tender toward the poor, and compassionate toward the needy. True Christians are generous, warmhearted, and beneficent toward others. They delight in mercy, treasure kindness, and are eager to do good to needy people. They are not stingy, parsimonious, or miserly. When they encounter people who are afflicted and in genuine need, their regenerate instinct is to provide aid and relief (see Luke 10:25–37). The virtues of mercy, kindness, and love should radiate from the Christian's life and character. All of this is the product of the new birth.

The second important lesson Christians can glean from Spurgeon is that such transformation is a vital part of the Christian witness in the world. The experience of supernatural regeneration made manifest in one's merciful and compassionate disposition toward others is one of the most compelling demonstrations of the power of the gospel to change men and women. The new birth transmutes people from being entirely consumed with the love of self to being consumed with the needs of others. Spurgeon reminds us that regeneration should produce something universally attractive and compelling to a world full of sorrows and misery. What a credit it would be to the gospel's appeal if the world saw in the people of God

a universal predisposition of compassion in the face of deprivation and want. How the testimony of the church would be improved if it were true that "wherever a man met a Christian he met a helper." Perhaps more would be won to the faith if Christians showed a commitment to compassionate concern for the poor and the afflicted, not necessarily as a means of transforming the culture or eradicating poverty from the world, but simply as a way of living out their new nature in Christ.

Few things poison the Christian witness as much as cruelty and hard-heartedness toward the poor and the oppressed. A lack of compassion among Christians for needy people paralyzes the church's testimony in the world and bears false witness about the power of the new birth and the sweetness of the grace of God. Because of the gospel, Christians should be the most gracious people in the world. Such is the inevitable effect of experiencing God's love in regeneration.

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"As Christians and church leaders navigate the challenges of our day, this book provides us with a mentor who will help us both guard the gospel and live out its implications."
Geoff Chang, curator of the Spurgeon Library, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

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