

## SPURGEON AND THE COMMON MAN

D.W. Bebbington

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) represent opposite poles in Victorian England. Arnold, the son of the great headmaster of Rugby School, was a poet by preference, an inspector of schools by necessity, and a critic of literature and society who commanded a wide audience. He was the broadest of Anglican Broad Churchmen in his views (though High Church in practice, in accordance with his wife's convictions), a fellow of an Oxford college, a man deeply steeped in classical learning, a scholar and an aesthete. Spurgeon, the son and grandson of Independent ministers from Essex, was a pastor by calling, a vivid preacher whose fame ensured that his sermons outsold those of any contemporary. He was a Baptist who maintained a Calvinist outlook when it was ceasing to be usual, a man with no college training but with a deep appreciation of Puritan theology, arguably the most influential figure in the Evangelical world of his day.<sup>1</sup>

Arnold had no time for what he considered Spurgeon's pulpit vulgarities, his lack of taste and his unbalanced worldview. Spurgeon, according to Arnold, failed to appreciate the greatest lesson of antiquity, the need to seek perfection in all spheres of life, but instead concentrated on spiritual matters to the exclusion of broader cultural interests. He was a prime example of the "born Hebraisers," who, like the Jews of the Old Testament, neglected the arts and sciences that had sprung up among the ancient Greeks for the sake of obsessive religiosity.<sup>2</sup> Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), which included this critique of Spurgeon, was a sustained onslaught on the values of English Nonconformity. Spurgeon, for Arnold, was a symbol of the hateful mediocrity that Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists and other Nonconformists had injected into the bloodstream of the middle classes. Spurgeon stood

---

<sup>1</sup> The standard biographies are Park Honan, *Matthew Arnold: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981) and Patricia S. Kruppa, *Charles Haddon Spurgeon: A Preacher's Progress* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* [1869], ed. J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: University Press, 1935), 173.

condemned for his commonness. Arnold concentrated his censure most of all on the preacher's advocacy of disestablishment. "Mr. Spurgeon and the Nonconformists," Arnold pointed out, upheld the "mechanical maxim" that church establishments were always bad because Christ had declared that his kingdom was not of this world.<sup>3</sup> They concluded that the Church of England should be severed from the organs of the state. Such a policy, Arnold held, would be a disaster for the nation. The moral influence of the church would be withdrawn from public policy; the state would cease to restrain the wilder religious excitements of the times. The union of the church and state, in the opinion of Arnold and other whiggishly-inclined intellectuals, was a guarantee of steady moral progress in England.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the establishment could ensure that education would spread to a much wider public. The mass of the people, in Arnold's estimate, was in desperate need of civilizing influences. Spurgeon and his like, by advocating disestablishment, were threatening to dismantle the most powerful agency for improving the condition of the nation.

Spurgeon himself, on the other hand, looked at affairs in an entirely different light. He called for disestablishment, among other reasons, because he believed that churches, unshackled by state interference, should single-mindedly spread the gospel rather than propagate particular cultural standards. There was no need for the Church of England to elevate the values of the common people because their attitudes were fundamentally sound already. There was certainly a need for more schools in the land, but they should transmit the exciting Bible-based culture rather than any novelties favoured by intellectuals such as Arnold. Spurgeon himself established a college for training preachers. From his policies there, his lectures to the students and his remarks about the type of men he intended to produce, it is possible to reconstruct a social vision that contrasts sharply with Arnold's. It amounts to a celebration of the qualities of the common man.

There was, in the first place, a warning against undue stress on the significance of learning. True religion, accessible to all, was vastly more important than the scholarship that was necessarily restricted to the intelligent. "We are not called to proclaim philosophy and metaphysics," Spurgeon told his students, "but the simple gospel."<sup>5</sup> Spurgeon's attitude was not a straightforward

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>4</sup> J. P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867-1875* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 93.

<sup>5</sup> *Lectures to my Students* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1954), 79.

version of anti-intellectualism. Although he was much less of a scholar than his younger brother, James Archer Spurgeon, Charles Haddon was a profoundly bookish man. He avidly collected the works of Puritan divines, assembling a personal library of over 12,000 volumes, and he recommended churches to create their own libraries for ministers.<sup>6</sup> But he valued books, as he valued knowledge in general, primarily for utilitarian reasons. Wisdom was for immediate practical application. His most popular book, *John Ploughman's Talk* (1868), was a collection of proverbs embodying homely truths for everyday life. "It is hard to shave an egg," ran a typical one, "or pull hairs out of a bald pate, but they are both easier than paying debts out of an empty pocket."<sup>7</sup>

To parade one's profound learning, in Spurgeon's view, was a species of pretentious arrogance. His students should avoid "the foolish affection of intellectualism"; they would not be addressing "highly intelligent audiences."<sup>8</sup> Accordingly the entrance policy of his college was designed to exclude nobody on educational grounds.<sup>9</sup> Many newly admitted students had to be taught the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, but they could go on, without high scholastic attainments, to be useful ministers. Again, there was no question of allowing students to enrol at university while training for the ministry. "Our men seek no collegiate degrees, or classical honours," wrote Spurgeon, "though many of our brethren could readily obtain them."<sup>10</sup> The purpose of his Pastors' College was to prepare preachers of the gospel, not budding scholars. Learning, though useful as an auxiliary, was not the business of life.

Spurgeon was particularly wary of the ancient literature that Arnold loved. For Arnold the classics were the supreme expression of human civilisation; for Spurgeon they risked being a diversion from the knowledge of God. Some ministers, in particular, might suppose that classical learning constituted their qualification rather than "a call from above."<sup>11</sup> Spurgeon recalled the saying of a quaint evangelist that "Christ hung crucified beneath Greek, Latin, and Hebrew."<sup>12</sup> Unlike other theological colleges, therefore, Spurgeon's

---

<sup>6</sup> Kruppa, *Spurgeon*, 211; Spurgeon, *Lectures*, 175.

<sup>7</sup> *John Ploughman's Talk* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, [1868]), 86.

<sup>8</sup> *Lectures*, 232; *Annual Paper descriptive of the Lord's Work connected with the Pastors' College during the year 1870* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1871), 9. Hereafter *AP*, though titles vary slightly.

<sup>9</sup> *AP* (1870), 12.

<sup>10</sup> *AP* (1871), 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Lectures*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

institution did not compel each of its attenders, even if poorly educated, "to muddle his poor head with Hebrew."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, if practicable, Hebrew and Greek were taught as an aid to understanding the Old and New Testaments.

Furthermore Latin was included in the curriculum because it underlay the grammar and vocabulary of the English language. "What anatomy is to surgery," Spurgeon admitted, "that the classical languages are to oratory."<sup>14</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, the syllabus sometimes included even Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* with its leanings to atheism.<sup>15</sup> On occasion Spurgeon could quote ten lines from Homer, though in English translation, to support a point about speaking technique.<sup>16</sup> Yet the prevailing tone of his comments on the classics was disparaging. "Wisdom," he remarked in *John Ploughman's Talk*, "does not always speak Latin."<sup>17</sup> The motto of the University of Oxford, where the classical philosophers formed the backbone of the curriculum, should not be *Dominus mea illuminatio* (The Lord is my light) but *Aristoteles meae tenebrae* (Aristotle is my darkness).<sup>18</sup> His own students, Spurgeon observed, were not to be "apostles of Plato and Aristotle, but ministers of Christ."<sup>19</sup> In the preacher's mind there was an opposition between classical knowledge and Christian doctrine that Arnold could never have endorsed.

Spurgeon also despised the "culture" that Arnold was the first to define. Taste, refinement, and aesthetic sensibility were alien to him. He urged his trainees to use plain speech in the pulpit, the language "not of the university, but of the universe."<sup>20</sup> His contempt for the elegance of the drawing room was conveyed even in his metaphors:

Better far to give the people masses of unprepared truth in the rough, like pieces of meat from a butcher's block, chopped off anyhow, bone and all, and even dropped down in the sawdust, than ostentatiously and delicately hand them out upon a china dish a delicious slice of nothing at all,

---

<sup>13</sup> AP (1870), 14.

<sup>14</sup> AP (1886-1887), 7.

<sup>15</sup> AP (1890-1891), 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Lectures*, 273.

<sup>17</sup> *John Ploughman's Talk*, 177.

<sup>18</sup> *Lectures*, 78.

<sup>19</sup> AP (1870), 9.

<sup>20</sup> AP (1870), 5.

decorated with the parsley of poetry, and flavoured with the sauce of affection.<sup>21</sup>

Although on occasion he could commend "the cultural man in his sanctified personality,"<sup>22</sup> the praise was for the sanctification rather than the culture. It was more usual for him to lambast the whole concept. "Highly cultured soul-murderers," he declared trenchantly, "will find their boasted "culture" to be no excuse in the day of judgment."<sup>23</sup> His students were to prefer common sense to culture. They would then win the approval of "the commonsense multitude."<sup>24</sup>

It is not surprising that the type of philosophy favoured in the college was the Scottish school of "common sense."<sup>25</sup> Teaching that the everyday assumptions of the ordinary person are axioms that need not be questioned, it had an affinity for Spurgeon's cast of mind. He was bored by art galleries and museums, even in Italy, and resisted the contemporary tendency to adopt the Gothic style for chapel building. He preferred the "serviceable old meetinghouse."<sup>26</sup> Likewise, in literature his praise was usually reserved for those with whom he felt a religious sympathy. Thus, the seventeenth-century Puritan John Bunyan was described as a man "of rare poetical temperament."<sup>27</sup> Culture in a broader sense was not worth the candle.

Even the good manners expected in society were distasteful to Spurgeon. They savoured too much of hypocrisy to his bluff, non-sense personality. Habitually signing his letters "Yours heartily," the preacher approved "geniality," "a great heart," "a large loving heart."<sup>28</sup> "As a general rule," he wrote, "I hate the fashions of society, and detest conventionalities, and if I conceived it best to put my foot through a law of etiquette, I should feel gratified in having to do it."<sup>29</sup> He delighted in a piece of advice said to have been given by an experienced pastor to his son, but in reality a satire by Paxton Hood, a contemporary Congregational minister:

---

<sup>21</sup> *Lectures*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>25</sup> David Gracey, *Sin and the Unfolding of Salvation* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1894), 16.

<sup>26</sup> Kruppa, *Spurgeon*, 218; *AP* (1870), 8.

<sup>27</sup> *Lectures*, 106.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Keep also a watchful eye on all likely persons, especially wealthy or influential, who may come to your town; call upon them, and attempt to win them over by the devotions of the drawing-room to your cause. ... And I would say to you, be a gentleman. ... We must show that our religion is the religion of good sense and good taste ... If I were asked what is your first duty, *be proper*; and your second, *be proper*; and your third, *be proper*.<sup>30</sup>

Spurgeon loathed the proprieties associated with gentlemanly status. We are not, he asserted, "to be the lackeys of those who affect gentility or boast refinement."<sup>31</sup> In her novel, *North and South* (1854-55), Elizabeth Gaskell portrays the ideal of gentlemanly living, identified with southern England, in conflict with the notion of what becomes a man, identified with the north. Spurgeon, though originating in East Anglia rather than the north, was spokesman for a similar provincial protest against the mannered life of the capital. He championed rustic values rooted in the soil, the ancestral wisdom of John Ploughman, against the debased lifestyle falsely called urbane.

Against the ideal of the gentleman, Spurgeon, like Elizabeth Gaskell, set the image of a man. "Scarcely one man in a dozen," he lamented, "in the pulpit talks like a man."<sup>32</sup> Ministers should be "men," he urged, "for it is hard to see how otherwise they will be truly men of God."<sup>33</sup> "Manliness," he concluded, "must never be sacrificed to elegances."<sup>34</sup> Though far removed theologically from the Broad Churchmanship of Charles Kingsley, Spurgeon shared his passion for "muscular Christianity."<sup>35</sup> One of Spurgeon's former students recalled, as a primary element in his instruction, the "withering sarcasm for all fops and pretenders."<sup>36</sup> Spurgeon sneered at the "effeminate vice" of insisting on wearing black kid gloves in the pulpit; likewise he denounced the gown, then just starting to

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 172-173.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>35</sup> David Newsome, *Godliness and Good Learnings: Four Studies on a Victorian Ideal* (London: John Murray, 1961), chap. 4.

<sup>36</sup> *C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography: Volume 2: The Full Harvest 1860-1892* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 109.

become fashionable among Nonconformists, as “the effeminate symbol of officialism.”<sup>37</sup> His students should avoid the style of enunciation that was “very lady-like, mincing, delicate, servant-girlified.”<sup>38</sup> Silly young ladies might admire the dear young men who spoke so, but that would not be the general opinion. “Few ears are delighted with the voice of peacocks.”<sup>39</sup>

It was not merely a matter of style; to Spurgeon the question was a matter of effective Christian ministry. “Our working class,” he contended, “will never be brought even to consider the truth of Christianity by teachers who are starched and fine. The British artisan admires manliness, and prefers to lend his ear to one who speaks in a hearty and natural style.”<sup>40</sup> And the issue was especially important for Baptists. A pastor had to be “manly and independent” if he was to gain the willing support of his people in a system of congregational independency.<sup>41</sup> To a sympathetic female observer, Spurgeon seemed emphatically a “man’s man.”<sup>42</sup>

He found one of his heroes in Martin Luther, “a great big warm-hearted being,” “thoroughly genuine,” always himself. “He was a man,” he concluded.<sup>43</sup> The true man must not be flawed by weakness. Luther, according to Spurgeon, fortunately had “his head set fast on his shoulders,” and “if it had not been his neck would have been broken in the desperate rushes he made.”<sup>44</sup> Luther was forthright, irrepressible, even in the hardest circumstances.

At all times, Spurgeon told his students, they should shun laziness. “Brethren,” he exhorted them, “do something; do something; do something. While committees waste their time over resolutions, do something.”<sup>45</sup> He was voicing a particularly intense form of the activism characteristic of Evangelicals, an activism that drove him to work far too hard, to contract gout in an acutely painful form and to sink to his grave before he was sixty. He wanted, as students in his college, “men of self-sacrifice, willing to put up with all sorts of inconveniences, and even sufferings, to attain their end.”<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> *Lectures*, 301, 112.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*; 300.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>42</sup> [Mrs. F. Curtis], *Memories of a Long Life* (N. p.: privately printed, 1912), 143.

<sup>43</sup> *The Freeman*, 7 December 1883, p. 803.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Lectures*, 217.

<sup>46</sup> *AP* (1870), 11.

He refused to admit “those who cannot endure hardness, but are of the kid-glove variety.”<sup>47</sup> His men must not become “too sensitive to be able to cope with the roughness of certain classes.”<sup>48</sup> They must feel at home in Bethnal Green, one of the deprived areas in the East End of London, as well as in superior suburbs.

At weekends, the Pastor’s College men were sent out not just to preach in exciting chapels, but also to gather fresh congregations from scratch. It was a demanding experience, but many students — as Spurgeon intended — proved their metal in the process. There were no recipes for success other than unremitting labour. Keswick teaching, for instance, with its promise of power for service from sanctification by faith, received short shrift from Spurgeon. “One thing I notice,” he remarked, “when a brother gets perfectly holy he becomes wholly useless, and has lost the passion which others have for seeking the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”<sup>49</sup> Diligence in a calling, whether ministerial or lay, was as fundamental to Spurgeon as it had been to the Puritans.

“There is such a thing,” declared Spurgeon, “as being too much a minister, and becoming too little a man.” He warmly disliked the professionalism of the pulpit that abstracted a pastor from common humanity. He warned his students to “avoid everything which is stilted, official, fussy, and pretentious.”<sup>50</sup> His name for the snare was “officialism.” Baptist church government, he argued, with its large place for popular participation, was trying to “those who crave for the dignity of officialism.”<sup>51</sup> Involvement in the regular life of his vast congregation at the Metropolitan Tabernacle was Spurgeon’s remedy for any symptoms of the disease in his students. At church meetings of the Tabernacle they would discover how the business of a congregation should be conducted without stiffness or sentiment.<sup>52</sup> Pastors of chapel communities must not lord it over their flocks. “The Nonconformists of England,” he maintained, “are a race of freemen.” The seat of officialism, by contrast, was the Church of England. Its ministry was staffed by “gentlemen who condescend to instruct the lower orders.”<sup>53</sup>

In 1864 Spurgeon provoked a major rift between Church and chapel when he denounced Evangelical, Anglican clergymen for

---

<sup>47</sup> *Lectures*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> *AP* (1870), 10.

<sup>49</sup> *The Freeman*, 20 April 1883, p.245.

<sup>50</sup> *Lectures*, 166.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>52</sup> *AP* (1886-1887), 9.

<sup>53</sup> *AP* (1870), 8.



remaining loyal to an institution that taught baptismal regeneration. He was sharply criticised for his outburst, but remained unrepentant even when he was forced to withdraw from the Evangelical Alliance.<sup>54</sup> He was convinced that the Church of England fostered all the intellectual and social vices he deplored. He referred disparagingly to the vestments of the Ritualist party as the “late revival of millinery in the Anglican Church” and mimicked the “ecclesiastical twang which is much admired in the Establishment.” “He that hath yaws to yaw let him yaw” was his imitation of the affected accent of a clergyman.<sup>55</sup> It was folly for Nonconformists to ape their ways. He made pungent remarks about his former students who began to wear coats with a clerical cut and stiff all-round collars.<sup>56</sup> Ecclesiastical posturing was peculiarly hateful to him.

So too was the stance of the Conservative Party. Spurgeon paid close attention to political affairs and was rabidly partisan. “Vote,” he wrote to his congregation during the 1880 general election, “for those whose principles denounce needless war, and whose watchword is justice at home and abroad. For temperance, thrift, religious equality, and social progress let the Christian vote be one and indivisible.”<sup>57</sup> That was to endorse the Liberal Party, which was concentrating its campaign against the bellicose policies of Lord Beaconsfield’s Conservative administration. Yet Spurgeon went further still. He expressed his distaste for the ranked social order that Conservatives were pledged to defend, criticising “the landed interest, the nobility, and the vast army of persons whose positions are more or less mixed up with the conservation of things as they are.”<sup>58</sup> The party earned his opposition less by its policies than by its social composition. It was the political equivalent of the Church of England, the sworn enemy of Dissent and the defender of unjust privilege.

Although he tried to exclude partisan statements from his sermons, Spurgeon was heart and soul a Liberal. The worst fate in his own parliamentary constituency, he wrote to his brother in 1885, would be for Liberal to fight Liberal so as “to let in a Tory.”<sup>59</sup> There

---

<sup>54</sup> Kruppa, *Spurgeon*, chap. 5.

<sup>55</sup> *Lectures*, 300, 119-120.

<sup>56</sup> William Williams, *Charles Haddon Spurgeon: Personal Reminiscences* (London: Religious Tract Society, n.d.), 28.

<sup>57</sup> *The Sword and the Trowel*, April 1880, p.191.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, July 1876, p.304.

<sup>59</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, Letter to James Archer Spurgeon, 1 Aug. 1885 in G. Holden Pike, *James Archer Spurgeon, D.D. LL.D.* (London: Alexander & Shephard, 1894), 159.

was nevertheless no question in his mind of sympathy for socialism. We want, he wrote at the time of the Paris Commune in 1871, "no red Republicans in the pulpit." Yet, he went on, "we rejoice when we see a man is thoroughly, heartily, lovingly with the people."<sup>60</sup> That was the mark of the Liberal Party under William Ewart Gladstone as much as of historic Protestant Dissent. Liberalism, like Nonconformity, was the champion of the "manly freedom" that Spurgeon espoused.<sup>61</sup>

The preacher was strongly averse to foreigners whenever, in his view, they were tainted with either an overbearing temper or a cowardly spirit. Both qualities he associated with the Roman Catholic Church. At the end of his career he broke with Gladstone's Liberals when the party proposed Home Rule for Ireland. This measure, Spurgeon feared, was the prelude to the creation of an "Established Irish Catholic Church" to which the Protestants of the island would be sacrificed.<sup>62</sup> Catholics, however, could be abject as well as oppressive. Spurgeon poked fun at the ascetic monks of Rome who greeted each other with the words, "Brother, we must die," suggesting that their melancholy was probably the result of poor digestion or a troubled conscience.<sup>63</sup> Protestant Englishmen, Spurgeon implied, did not normally suffer from either. He once recounted the words of the English commander at Cadiz: "What a shame will it be, you Englishmen, who feed upon good beef and beer, to let these rascally Spaniards beat you that eat nothing but oranges and lemons!"<sup>64</sup> Spurgeon, in fact, was a robust patriot of a traditional kind. He urged his first trainee to "come back to Old John Bull's way of utterance," and, although he claimed his students needed to know the history of their own nation and every other land, the only college books about the past were two histories of England.<sup>65</sup>

No modern foreign languages were taught at the college, even though German had been on the curriculum of the other Baptist college in London since 1841.<sup>66</sup> Germany was particularly suspect as

---

<sup>60</sup> *AP* (1870), 8.

<sup>61</sup> *Lectures*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> *The Sword and the Trowel*, June 1886, p.294.

<sup>63</sup> *Lectures*, 169-170.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>65</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, Letter to T.W. Medhurst, 26 July 1862, in I. H. Murray, ed., *Letters of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 83; *AP* (1886-1887), 6; *AP*(1884-1885), 10

<sup>66</sup> Modern languages are absent from Spurgeon's catalogue of subjects taught: "What we aim at in the Pastors' College", *AP* (1886-1887), 3-9; E. A. Payne, "The Development of Nonconformist Theological Education

the chief source of modern heresy: the college, according to Spurgeon's principal, George Rogers, "adheres to the Puritanic in distinction from the Germanic theology."<sup>67</sup> Otherwise Spurgeon's overseas vision was very much a form of Protestant internationalism. He approved of the Netherlands, to whose Presbyterians he sent preachers from his college; the British colonial territories, to which he sent more; and particularly the United States, "the great republic" swelled by "the people of England."<sup>68</sup> Although at first he declined American applicants to the college on the ground that they should be trained among their own people, he later relented, taking men from the United States as well as from Australia and the Cape.<sup>69</sup> It is not surprising that Americans both visited and imitated the college.<sup>70</sup> Spurgeon clearly felt an affinity for the Protestant values embodied in the United States.

The explanation lies in the ethos of that land. Nathan Hatch has recently illustrated the prevalence of a democratic temper in American religion that permitted vigorous initiatives by ordinary individuals to propagate their own versions of Protestantism, whether orthodox or idiosyncratic.<sup>71</sup> The reliance on the competence of the common man, however, was far from peculiar to the United States; rather, it was a feature of the whole English-speaking world, wherever popular Evangelicalism had penetrated. Spurgeon fully shared the anti-elitist attitudes so widespread in the United States. On one occasion he urged his students to make the effort to adapt their pulpit language to their hearers. "Go up to his level," he recommended, "if he is a poor man; go down to his understanding if he is an educated person."<sup>72</sup> The humbler the audience, he implied, the higher its plane. It was of a piece with his whole approach to training. Other Baptist colleges, he believed, were excluding able potential preachers by expecting them or their families to pay for their theological education. If a man or his relations lacked the

---

in the Nineteenth Century, with special Reference to Regent's Park College", in E. A. Payne, ed., *Studies in History and Religion* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1942), 237.

<sup>67</sup> AP (1882-1883), 25.

<sup>68</sup> AP (1871), 5; AP (1879-1880), 3; AP (1870), 16.

<sup>69</sup> AP (1871), 6; AP (1880-1881), 4.

<sup>70</sup> AP (1871), 10, 8. Cf. Virginia L. Brereton, *Training God's Army: The American Bible School, 1880-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 56.

<sup>71</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>72</sup> *Lectures*, 131.

money, he was lost to the ministry. Spurgeon, on the other hand, opened his institution to the poorest. A few paid fees because they could afford them, but the majority received their training free of charge.<sup>73</sup> Here was a consciously egalitarian policy. Again, once students were attending the college, they were put into lodgings with Christian families nearby. This scheme had the advantage of being cheap, but it was also chosen deliberately so that, as Spurgeon put it, his students “should continue in association with ordinary humanity.”<sup>74</sup> That was the hallmark of Spurgeon’s training project: to ensure that all the pastors remained men of the people.

Historians of Victorian society have recently been rediscovering the extent to which its inhabitants thought in terms of “the people.” Marxist and Marxist-influenced historiography have supposed that capitalism created sharp class divisions, but evidence is now accumulating that there were powerful bonds between the working classes and the bulk of the middle classes. In general, factory owners were loved rather than hated by their employees; individuals normally thought in terms of the solidarity of the people rather than of the working class; and if there was any sharp class antagonism, it was the resentment voiced by the representatives of the people as a whole against the tiny landed elite.<sup>75</sup> These populist attitudes, it has been pointed out, were often rooted in Protestant traditions that looked back to the Puritans for their inspiration, felt close to the democratic spirit of the United States and found expression in the groundswell of support for the Gladstonian Liberal Party.<sup>76</sup> The resulting picture is not one of universal consensus in Victorian society, but rather of deep antagonism to the abuses of power and relics of privilege in high places.

Spurgeon is a significant piece in the jigsaw. Outspoken in his dislikes, he struck a pose of despising scholastic ambition, classical literature and culture in general from a practical standpoint. He contemptuously dismissed the code of the gentleman that he

---

<sup>73</sup> *AP* (1870), 11.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980); *idem*, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge: University Press, 1991).

<sup>76</sup> E. F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge: University Press, 1992).

associated with effeminacy, weakness and pretentiousness, both in the pulpit and in the wider society. In the twin causes of liberty and equality he denounced the Church of England, the Conservatives and foreigners moulded by Catholic lands. Although he was a Whig rather than a Conservative, Matthew Arnold was right to see in Spurgeon a threat to all that he held dear. Arnold stood for the dissemination of the more urbane views of the leisured elite among the middle classes, not least through the alliance of the church with the state. Spurgeon wanted to end the ability of the state to water down religion in any way. The preacher was one of the most articulate — perhaps the most articulate of all — in arguing the claims of the people against the elite. His immense popularity therefore flowed not only from his pugnacious loyalty to the basics of the gospel. It was also a result of his doughty championship of the common man.

*David W. Bebbington is a reader in History at the University of Stirling, Scotland. He is the author of a fair number of articles and books, including **Evangelicalism in Modern Britain. A History from the 1730s to the 1980s** (1989), which is rapidly becoming a standard work in its field, and a recent biography of William Gladstone, published by Eerdmans.*