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Charles Simeon: His Trials and Patience in the Ministry

by John Piper

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The most fundamental conflict that Simeon had was with his own heart. He had a somewhat harsh and self-assertive air about him. One day, early in Simeon's ministry, he was visiting Henry Venn, who was pastor twelve miles from Cambridge at Yelling. When he left to go home Venn's daughters complained to their father about his manner. Venn took the girls to the back yard and said, 'Pick me one of those peaches.' But it was early summer, and 'the peaches were still unripe'. They asked why he would want the green, unripe fruit. Venn replied, 'Well, my dears, it is green now, and we must wait; but a little more sun, and a few more showers, and the peach will be ripe and sweet. So it is with Mr Simeon.'

Simeon came to know himself and his sin very deeply. He described his maturing in the ministry as a growing downward. We will come back to this as the key to his great perseverance and success.

HIS CONGREGATION

The vicar of Trinity Church, Cambridge, died in October, 1782 just as Charles Simeon was about to leave the university to live in his father's home. Simeon had often walked by the church, he tells us, and said to himself, 'How should I rejoice if God were to give me that church, that I might preach the Gospel there and be a herald for Him in the University.' His dream came true when Bishop York appointed him 'curate-in-charge' (being only ordained a deacon at the time). His wealthy father had nudged the Bishop, and the pastor at St Edwards, where Simeon preached that summer, gave him an endorsement. He preached his first sermon there on 10th November 1782.

But the parishioners did not want Simeon. They wanted the assistant curate, Mr Hammond. Simeon was willing to step down but the Bishop told him

that even if he did decline the appointment he would not appoint Hammond. So Simeon stayed . . . for fifty-four years! And very gradually he overcame the opposition.

The first thing the congregation did in rebellion against Simeon was to refuse to let him be the Sunday afternoon lecturer. This was in their charge. It was like a second Sunday service. For five years they assigned the lecture to Mr Hammond. Then when he left, instead of turning it over to their pastor of five years they gave it to another independent man for seven more years! Finally, in 1794, Simeon was chosen lecturer. Imagine serving a church for twelve years which was so resistant to one's leadership that they would not let one preach Sunday evenings but hired an assistant to keep one out!

Simeon tried to start a later Sunday evening service and many townspeople came. But the churchwardens locked the doors while the people stood waiting in the street. Once Simeon had the doors opened by a locksmith, but when it happened again he pulled back and dropped the service.

The second thing the church did was to lock the pew doors on Sunday mornings. The pew holders refused to come or to let others sit in their personal pews. Simeon set up seats in the aisles, nooks and corners at his own expense. But the churchwardens took them out and threw them in the church-yard. When he tried to visit from house to house, hardly a door would open to him. This situation lasted at least ten years. The records show that in 1792 Simeon got a legal decision that the pewholders could not lock their pews and stay away indefinitely. But he did not use it. He let his steady, relentless ministry of the Word and prayer and community-witness gradually overcome the resistance.

But one must not give the impression that all the troubles were over after the first twelve years. After years of peace, in 1812 (after he had been there thirty years!) there were again opponents in the congregation making the waters rough. He wrote to a friend, 'I used to sail in the Pacific; I am now learning to navigate the Red Sea, that is full of shoals and rocks.' But again he endured patiently and in 1816 he writes that peace has come and the church is better attended than ever. Which of us would not have immediately concluded at the age of 53, after thirty years in one church, that an upsurge of opposition was a sure sign to move on?

THE UNIVERSITY

As the students made their way to Trinity Church they were prejudiced against the pastor by the hostile congregation and for years he was slandered with all kinds of rumours. Basically his enemies said that he was a bad man with a front of piety. The students at Cambridge held Simeon in derision for his biblical preaching and his uncompromising stand as an evangelical. They repeatedly disrupted his services and caused a tumult in the streets. One observer wrote from personal experience, 'For many years Trinity Church and the streets leading to it were the scenes of the most disgraceful tumults.'

Sometimes Simeon felt utterly alone at the university where he lived. He looked back on those early years and wrote. 'I remember the time that I was quite surprised that a Fellow of my own College ventured to walk with me for a quarter of an hour on the grass plot before Clare Hall; and for many years after I began my ministry I was "as a man wondered at", by reason of the paucity of those who showed any regard for true religion.' Even after he had won the respect of many, there could be grave mistreatment. For example, even as late as 1816 (thirty-four years into his ministry) he wrote to a missionary friend: 'Such conduct is observed towards me at this very hour by one of the Fellows of the College as, if practiced by *me*, would set not the College only but the whole town and University in a flame.'

PHYSICAL WEAKNESS AND REINVIGORATION

In 1807, after twenty-five years of ministry, his health failed suddenly. His voice gave way so that preaching was very difficult and at times he could only speak in a whisper. After a sermon he would feel 'more like one dead than alive'. This broken condition lasted for thirteen years, till he was sixty years old. In all this time Simeon pressed on in his work. The way this weakness came to an end is remarkable and shows the amazing hand of God on this man's life. He tells the story that in 1819 he was on his last visit to Scotland. As he crossed the border he says he was 'almost as perceptibly revived in strength as the woman was after she had touched the hem of our Lord's garment'. His interpretation of God's providence in this begins back before his weakness. Up till then he had promised himself a very active life up to age sixty, and then a 'Sabbath evening.' Now he seemed to hear his Master saying:

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

So, at sixty years old, Simeon renewed his commitment to his pulpit and the mission of the church and preached vigorously for seventeen more years until two months before his death.

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