‘A Man of God is a Manly Man’: Spurgeon, Luther and ‘Holy Boldness’

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Although Charles Haddon Spurgeon still enjoys hero status in certain quarters today, it is hard to conceive fully the extent of his reputation and influence during his lifetime. An established Baptist minister in London while still only a teenager, he preached regularly for nearly 40 years to congregations of several thousand, reaching tens of thousands more throughout the world via printed versions of his sermons. By the time he was 26 the numbers wanting to hear him each Sunday were such that the 6,000-capacity Metropolitan Tabernacle was built for him in Newington Butts, an unfashionable yet populous region south of the Thames, now known more familiarly as ‘The Elephant and Castle’. His printed sermons had a regular weekly readership of 25,000, with those on special topics selling as many as 350,000, and his Sunday messages were cabled every week to New York for inclusion in large-circulation newspapers in the United States. Translated into 40 languages and into Braille, Spurgeon’s sermons were read throughout the world, to the extent that by the time of his death in 1892 more than 50 million copies had been sold worldwide, a figure which has since more than doubled. When his numerous books, pamphlets, tracts and other writings are also taken into account, Timothy George’s claim in the early 1990s that, ‘a century after his death, there are more works in print by Spurgeon than by any other English speaking author, living or dead’ becomes almost believable. Among notable contemporaries who admired his preaching and courted his friendship were John Ruskin and William Gladstone, the latter finding in Spurgeon a committed supporter of the Liberal cause. During his final illness prayers were said for him by the Prime Minister, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Chief Rabbi and even the Prince of Wales; and, following his death, some 60,000 people filed past his body as it lay in state,
his funeral procession, some two miles in length, bringing over 100,000 people onto the streets of London.³

The reasons for Spurgeon’s popularity in his own time, and decline into relative obscurity since, need not delay us long here, though it is clear from contemporary accounts that one of his singular gifts was an ability to relate to the ordinary woman and man. George Eliot, though finding him ‘common and empty of guiding intelligence’, observed that he had ‘a gift of a fine voice, very flexible and various, admirably clear and fluent in his language’.⁴ The aristocratic George Greville, who heard the 23-year-old Spurgeon preach to 9,000 people in London in 1857, considered that he had ‘a manner natural, impassioned, and without affectation or extravagance; wonderful fluency and command of language, abounding in illustration, and very often of a familiar kind, but without anything either ridiculous or irreverent.’⁵ Spurgeon’s ‘common touch’ or ‘naturalness’ undoubtedly owed much to his upbringing in a small agricultural community in Essex, and he turned it into something of a trademark, disdaining high learning and culture, and advocating, in preaching, the language ‘not of the university, but of the universe’. ‘Better far to give the people masses of unprepared truth in the rough, like pieces of meat from a butcher’s block,’ he once said, ‘than ostentatiously and delicately hand them out upon a china dish a delicious slice of nothing at all, decorated with the parsley of poetry, and flavoured with the sauce of affectation’.⁶ It was for the ‘gentlemen’ who purveyed such vacuous theology that Spurgeon reserved his sharpest invective, for their approach could not have been more different from his own: ‘People come to me for one thing, and it is no use my pretending to give them the opposite as well. I preach to them a Calvinist creed and a Puritan morality. That is what they want and that is what they get.’⁷ The purpose of the pastors’ training college he founded in London in the 1850s was, he said, to produce ‘men of the people, who feel with them’.⁸

Spurgeon’s unswerving adherence to a reformed creed not surprisingly came at a price, and by the late 1880s he found himself sadly adrift from most of his colleagues in the Baptist Union and embroiled in what became known popularly as the ‘Down Grade Controversy’. Unhappy at its refusal to draw up a substantial statement of its beliefs and define what it understood as orthodoxy, and concerned that many churches and chapels under its care were watering down key doctrines and becoming lukewarm in the faith, Spurgeon seceded from the Union, casting a shadow over the Baptist denomination which remained for more than a generation. At a time when higher criticism