

Introduction

The most striking sermon I have ever read was preached by C. H. Spurgeon in the Music Hall, Surrey Gardens, on Sunday morning, 5th December, 1858.¹ The text was Luke 14:23, ‘compel them to come in,’² and the preacher tells his congregation that he is in such haste to obey this command that he has no time for an introduction but must immediately set about his business; and he tells them, too, that he has nothing to say to the people of God this morning. He is going after those in the ‘highways and hedges’, those

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- 1 See *The New Park Street Pulpit containing Sermons Preached and Revised by the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon During the Year 1859* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1884), pp. 17-24. Though the title refers to 1859, the first three sermons in the volume were preached in November and December 1858. The sermon is included as an appendix in this book.
 - 2 Luke 14:23: ‘And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled’ (KJV).

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that will not come to Christ, and he must compel them to come in.

But, first, he must 'find' them, and he takes his cue from the context, 'Bring in hither the *poor*, and the *maimed*, and the *halt* and the *blind*' (Luke 14:21, KJV, italics added). As for the *poor*, their problem is not that they are poor in circumstances. They may well be, but that is no bar to the kingdom of heaven. His business is with those who are spiritually poor. They have no faith, no virtue, no good work, no grace and, worst of all, no hope. But he must lay hold of them and compel them to come in.

Then he speaks to the *maimed*. They have lost all power to save themselves. They feel they cannot believe, they cannot repent, or do anything pleasing to God. But to them, too, the preacher was sent, to lift up the blood-stained banner of the cross and declare, 'Who so calleth upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Next to be addressed are the *halt*: halting, he says, between two opinions, sometimes savingly inclined, at other times called away by worldly gaiety. But the word of salvation is also sent to this limping brother: 'Halt no longer, but decide for God and His truth.'

And, finally, the *blind*, who cannot see their lost estate, or see that God is a just God, or see any beauty in Christ, or any happiness in religion: to them, too, he is sent.

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But then, fearful that even after such a list he has not met every particular case, he notes that his text takes a general sweep, ‘Go out into the highways and hedges.’ Here, he says, ‘we bring in all ranks and conditions of men – my lord upon his horse in the highway, and the woman trudging about her business, the thief waylaying the traveller – all these are in the highway, and they are all to be compelled to come in.’ This is the universal command: ‘compel them to come in.’

But no sooner has he said all this than he realises the herculean labour that lies before him: ‘As well might a little child seek to compel a Samson, as I seek to lead a sinner to the cross of Christ. *And yet my Master has sent me about the errand*’ (italics added).

And so he sets about ‘the work’, beginning with a survey of the great facts of the gospel (‘what the King has done for you’) before going on to direct a remarkable series of addresses to sinners. He *commands* them to repent and believe; he *exhorts* them to flee to Christ; he *entreats* them to stop and consider what they are rejecting; he *threatens* them with the prospect of a day when they shall no longer hear the voice of a gospel minister. This leaves only one more resort: he will *weep* for them. ‘When words fail us,’ he declares, ‘we can give tears – for words and tears are the arms by which gospel ministers compel men to come in. You do not know, and I suppose could not believe, how anxious a man whom God has called to the ministry feels about his congregation.’

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Even by Spurgeon's own standards this sermon was exceptional in its urgency, freeness and passion. Yet the message, and the tone of his message, was one that he maintained throughout his ministry. Sunday by Sunday, God in all His holiness, Christ in all His fulness, and gospel promises in all their glory, were pressed upon all within the reach of his voice. But inevitably such preaching had its critics, and Spurgeon was fully aware of them: 'Some hyper-Calvinist will tell me I am wrong in so doing. I cannot help it. I must do it. As I must stand before my Judge at last, I feel that I shall not make full proof of my ministry unless I entreat with many tears that ye would look unto Jesus Christ and receive his glorious salvation.' But such protestations were not enough to silence the critics. The preacher, they said, was betraying the Calvinism he professed to love. How could someone who believed in God's sovereign predestination offer Christ to sinners indiscriminately? How could someone who believed that human beings were by nature devoid of all spiritual ability nevertheless tell them it was their duty to believe in Christ? How could a man who knew that no one could come to Christ unless the Father drew him yet plead with them to look to the Saviour?

Today, there are still those who raise their voices against preachers who, they think, are too free with their evangelistic appeals; and, conversely, there are preachers who are inhibited in their evangelism by fear of such critics and by

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the feeling that they must always tread warily in relation to such doctrines as predestination and limited atonement. But the problem doesn't lie in these doctrines themselves. Men like Whitefield, Spurgeon and Chalmers believed in such doctrines as total depravity and unconditional election as firmly as any hyper-Calvinist; and they believed in them for the very good reason that they found them in Scripture. But they refused to follow the hyper-Calvinist in drawing from these doctrines inferences which Scripture itself never drew: the inference, for example, that since there was no universal redemption there should be no universal gospel offer. More important still, they refused to close their ears to the other voices they heard in Scripture, particularly the voices that commissioned them to bring the good news to every creature and to plead with sinners, simply as such, to be reconciled to God.

When Arminianism first appeared in Holland early in the seventeenth century some of the most distinguished divines in Europe gathered at the Synod of Dort (1618–19) to give an authoritative response on behalf of Reformed theology. The Synod spoke unambiguously of divine predestination, particular redemption and man's incapacity for any spiritual good. But, without a trace of embarrassment, the divines also went on to declare that 'the promise of the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons

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promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of his good pleasure sends the gospel.³ It is to this, the indiscriminate preaching of the promise, and the universal call to repent and believe, that hyper-Calvinists raise their strong objections. Why?

3 *The Canons of the Synod of Dort*, Article II:V. See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of the Evangelical Protestant Churches* (New York: Harper, 1882), p. 586.