

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Charles Spurgeon, Women's Ministry, and Female Preachers

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Charles Spurgeon lived during the enlightened times of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where many challenged church traditions. Upon his arrival in London, Spurgeon himself was at the forefront of this trend, as he rejected the traditional emphasis on oratory and rhetoric in preaching, and instead preached gospel-rich sermons in the language of the common person. When his building became too full, Spurgeon moved his worship services into secular venues like the Royal Surrey Gardens Music Hall, where non-religious types felt comfortable attending. Even among his fellow Baptists, Spurgeon adopted some unique practices, like appointing elders to serve alongside him.



In all these practices, however, Spurgeon was not guided by a contrarian spirit or prideful enlightenment. Rather, he was committed to the teaching of Scripture. This commitment meant that in areas where Scripture was silent, Spurgeon had the freedom to use wisdom and every available means to get the gospel out to the lost. But this commitment also meant that in areas where Scripture was clear, Spurgeon dared not trespass, no matter where his enlightened culture was going. In his sermon, “The Head of the Church,” Spurgeon declared,

When we meet together in church-meeting we cannot make laws for the Lord's kingdom; we dare not attempt it. Such necessary regulations as may be made for carrying out our Lord's commands, to meet for worship, and to proclaim the gospel, are commendable, because they are acts needful to obedience to his highest laws; but even these minor details are not tolerable if they clearly violate the spirit and mind of Jesus Christ. ... Law-making in the church was finished in that day when the curse was pronounced on him who should take from or add to the word of God. Christ alone is the legislator of his church—none but he . . . has left to us his Statute-book, sufficient to guide us in every dilemma.

So much of Spurgeon's controversial ministry was tearing down the extra-biblical traditions of churches in his day to get the gospel out. Christ alone was the Head of the Church, ruling the church by his Spirit through his Word.

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In our day, the ongoing conversation about complementarianism has brought Spurgeon back into a fresh controversy. While our debates may seem fresh, the question of the role of women in the church was something with which Christians wrestled back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the newer denominations and sects, like the Society of Friends or the Salvation Army, were drawing attention by allowing women to preach in their gatherings. Given his non-traditional views in other areas, what was Spurgeon's view on women preaching? And beyond preaching, what was Spurgeon's view on the role of women in the church?

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Spurgeon believed that the preaching of the Word in the gathering of the church was restricted to men, along with the office of elders and deacons. At the same time, his predominant emphasis was on calling women to engage in ministry in all the other ways that were available to them.

When it came to the gathering of the church, Spurgeon believed that, according to Scripture, women were not to preach. Preaching on Matthew 8:14, 15, "First Healing and the Service," Spurgeon commends the example of Peter's mother-in-law:

But notice that what this good woman did was very appropriate. Peter's wife's mother did not get out of bed and go down the street and deliver an address to an assembled multitude. Women are best when they are quiet. I share the apostle Paul's feelings when he bade women be silent in the assembly. Yet there is work for holy women, and we read of Peter's wife's mother that she arose and ministered to Christ. She did what she could and what she should. She arose and ministered to him. Some people can do nothing that they are allowed to do, but waste their energies in lamenting that they are not called on to do other people's work. Blessed are they who do what they should do. It is better to be a good housewife, or nurse, or domestic servant, than to be a powerless preacher or a graceless talker.

And then:

We greatly err when we dream that only a preacher can minister to the Lord—for Jesus has work of all sorts for all sorts of followers. Paul speaks of women who helped him much, and, assuredly, as there is no idle angel there ought to be no idle Christian. We are not saved for our own sakes, but that we may be of service to the Lord and to his people; let us not miss our calling.

In this passage and others, Spurgeon does not shy away from speaking to this issue. He teaches that Paul's instructions (likely alluding to 1 Tim. 2:12 and 1 Cor. 14:34) meant that women were not allowed to preach in the gathering of the church. Given this limitation,

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Spurgeon could not have envisioned a woman serving as an elder and would have seen such a practice as a contradiction of Paul's command.

At the same time, this passage demonstrates Spurgeon's emphasis when it came to his vision for the role of women in the church. Spurgeon believed in a working church, where every member actively served in their own way, and no member remained idle. Even while making it clear that Peter's mother-in-law did not preach, Spurgeon goes on to highlight all the ways she served Christ, and he holds her up as a model.

It's within this emphasis on the role of women in the work of the church where Spurgeon did, at times, call women to "preach." In all those instances, Spurgeon was not referring to preaching in the gathering of the church but sharing the gospel in their various contexts. For example, in his sermon "All At It" on Acts 8:4-5, Spurgeon observes that having been scattered, Christian men and women "went everywhere preaching the word," and he calls women to follow their example and do the same in all the contexts God has placed them. He's talking about evangelism, not preaching. This application, after all, is found under the first point of the sermon: "THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE WORK OF EVANGELIZING."

Likewise, Spurgeon makes a similar point in another sermon, "The Whole Machinery of Salvation," on Romans 10:14-15. Here, he declares:

Now, tonight, I wish that I could stir up everyone here to become a preacher, women and all; not that I care much for women preaching, but I want them to preach in the sense in which I have laid the matter down; that is, to make known to somebody the wondrous story of the cross. Speak to an individual, if you can. If you cannot do that, write. If you cannot write, send a sermon, or give a tract. Only do keep on making Christ known.

Once again, Spurgeon calls the women in his congregation to preach, that is, "to make known to somebody the wondrous story of the cross." This task of evangelism, or "preaching," was not limited to men. Over and against a society that limited the activity of women, Spurgeon wanted the women in his church to be fully engaged in the mission of the church.

## SPURGEON'S ROLE MODELS FOR WOMEN IN MINISTRY

Throughout his ministry, Spurgeon highlighted the ministries of many women as a way to encourage them to serve faithfully according to the gifts God had given them. In ways both big and small, Spurgeon taught the women of his church that they all had an

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important role to play in the work of the kingdom. Here are five examples of faithful women that Spurgeon held up to his people and the wider church.

## *Eliza Spurgeon: A Faithful Mother*

Eliza was the mother of seventeen children, eight of whom survived infancy. She devoted herself tirelessly to the nurture and care of her family. Her eldest son, Charles, provided several touching tributes to his faithful mother throughout his life and ministry. He once wrote:

I cannot tell you how much I owe to the solemn words of my good mother. ... It was the custom, on Sunday evenings, while we were yet little children, for her to stay at home with us, and then we sat round the table and read verse by verse, and she explained the Scripture to us. ... Certainly I have not the powers of speech with which to set forth my valuation of the choice blessing which the Lord bestowed on me in making me the son of one who prayed *for* me, and prayed *with* me. How can I ever forget her tearful eye when she warned me to escape from the wrath to come? . . . How can I forget when she bowed her knee, and with her arms about my neck, prayed, "Oh that my son might live before Thee!"

Eliza's second son, John Archer, who served as co-pastor to Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle once said, "She was the starting point of all the greatness any of us, by the grace of God, have ever enjoyed." Perhaps one of the greatest tokens of Eliza's faithfulness as a Christian mother was that all eight of her surviving children professed faith in Christ and commended the faithful example of their mother in leading them to Jesus. Spurgeon's father, John, also testified to Eliza's faithful witness before her children, recalling how impressed he was as he "heard her pray for them one by one by name."

## *Mary King: A Godly Mentor*

After Spurgeon left his parents' home, he went to study at Newmarket Academy in Cambridge. While there, he came under the influence of the humble and godly cook at the school named Mary King. Spurgeon was only 15-years-old when he met Mary, and she would come to have a tremendous influence on his spiritual development over the next two years. Spurgeon wrote of her:

She was a good old soul [and] liked something very sweet indeed, good strong Calvinistic doctrine. ... Many a time we have gone over the covenant of grace together, and talked of the personal election of the saints, their union to Christ, their final perseverance, and what vital godliness meant; and I do believe I learnt

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more from her than I should have learned from any six doctors of divinity of the sort we have nowadays.

Mary saw potential in young Charles and did not view it as inappropriate in the least to endeavor to disciple this precocious young man. Spurgeon had just recently come to faith and been baptized before he met Mary, and he was in need of someone to mentor him in his young faith. Mary King made for a most unlikely mentor, and yet she had a formative influence on Spurgeon's spiritual development in those pivotal days. Some years later, as Mary grew old, she became unwell, and Spurgeon eagerly supported her financially for the rest of her life to honor the contribution she made to his Christian walk.

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## *Susannah Spurgeon: A Companion in Ministry*

Susannah, or "Susie," as Spurgeon called her, was a remarkable woman. Not only was she a tremendously faithful wife and mother, but she also participated alongside her husband in the work of ministry. Susie was an invalid for most of her adult life, confined to her home much of the time. However, Susie was undaunted by the limitations imposed on her by her physical maladies.

As she surveyed the evangelical landscape of her day, Susie detected a need among many poor pastors in England for solid books with rich theology, such as the ones her husband wrote. This passion led her to found "Mrs. Spurgeon's Book Fund," which provided books free of charge to needy ministers all over the country. Throughout her life, she distributed hundreds of thousands of books, filling the shelves of poor pastors

Susie also became affectionately known as the "Mother" of the Pastors' College. She earned this title in part because of her heavy involvement in the early days of the College. Susie and Charles together practiced the most rigid home economy to allow themselves the ability to give liberally to the establishment and growth of the school. Susie also labored to make the Spurgeon home a center of hospitality for students of the college who frequently came to their home to enjoy fellowship with the Spurgeons.

Even after the death of her husband, Susie was still actively engaged in Christian work. Not only did her book fund continue, but Susie gave herself to the work of church planting in the final years of her life. While passing through the coastal town of Brexill-on-Sea, Susie was in search of a Baptist chapel where she could worship. Finding that there was no such chapel in the area, she undertook to plant a church there herself. The church she helped to plant, Beulah Baptist Church, still stands today as an evangelical witness in Brexill-on-Sea.

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## *Anne Hillyard: A Christian Philanthropist*

In the mid-1860s, Spurgeon began to lead his church in praying that God would guide them into some new work they could carry on for his glory and the good of the needy people of London. This prayer was answered through the benevolent vision of the unassuming widow of an Anglican pastor. Anne Hillyard was a godly woman who had inherited a large fortune from a deceased family member and was eager to use her money in benevolent causes. She carefully studied and waited for the right opportunity to invest her funds in kingdom work.

The opportunity came after she read an article in Spurgeon's magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*. She immediately sent a letter requesting a meeting with the famous preacher. It was at this meeting that she proposed a gift of £20,000 (worth about £2.5 million today) to start what came to be called the Stockwell Orphanage, founded in 1869. Over the next couple of decades, Anne and Charles partnered together to provide care for hundreds upon hundreds of needy orphans. The ministry continues today, simply known as "Spurgeons," and provides support and care for thousands of vulnerable children.

Spurgeon loved to tell the story of the auspicious origins of the Stockwell Orphanage. He also loved to hold Anne up as a model of Christian service. At the opening of the Orphanage, Spurgeon said of Anne:

When Mrs. Hillyard's munificent contributions were first announced in the newspapers, people said it had been given by a duchess, but I say no, it is given by a princess—one of the blood imperial—a daughter of the King of kings. She has given it in the most unostentatious manner desiring that her name should not be known, and I and my friends have dragged her into the light today contrary to her wishes. She is a simple, earnest, Christian woman, who has devoted by far the largest portion of her property to God without asking honour from anyone. She only asks help to this great work. I hope to see not 200, but 2,000 boys in the Orphanage, and I ask all those who now hear to break through their Christian rule and give three cheers for Mrs. Hillyard!

Anne died in 1880, surrounded by many of the boys she had rescued. Her final words were, "My boys! My boys!"

## *Mrs. Bartlett: A Teacher of Women and Servant of the Church*

Spurgeon believed it was entirely appropriate for women to teach other women in the church. Thus, he sought to promote and resource women who evidenced an ability to teach the truth to others.

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One such woman was Lavinia Bartlett. In 1859, she was asked to temporarily fill a post as a teacher of a small Sunday school class. At the class's first meeting, only three teenage girls showed up. Just six years later, she was regularly teaching upwards of 1,000 women weekly. The class had come to take on the character of an evangelistic Bible study, and Christian women would regularly invite their unconverted friends from outside the church to the class. Not only were members of the Tabernacle served through this class, but large numbers of women were regularly converted through Mrs. Bartlett's ministry, including many London prostitutes—at least one of whom went on to become a missionary.

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Spurgeon, for his part, made every effort to promote Mrs. Bartlett's work. He was fond of saying, "My best deacon is a woman." After Mrs. Bartlett died in 1875 at the age of sixty-nine, Spurgeon addressed her class with these words,

Her unstaggering reliance upon the Saviour has led many of you to confide in him. You saw how she believed, you saw the joy which her faith brought to her, the calm rest and power which she obtained, and you were led to Jesus Christ, perhaps unconsciously to yourselves, very much through her example. She was a thorough and complete believer; downright in her convictions and rooted in her principles. She was immersed into the Lord Jesus. ... What a worker she was. Nobody will ever know until the books are opened at the last how much she did. ... I do not believe that any mother in this place knows her children much better than she knew the members of this class. ... Her heart was large and her efforts incessant."

## CONCLUSION

Spurgeon's earnest desire was to promote the work of faithful and godly women in the life of the church. Though he believed that the pulpit was closed to women, the world was not. He would have wholeheartedly supported the words of an earlier evangelical woman, Hannah More, who said, "Action is the life of virtue, and the world is the theatre of action."

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