

OUR FIRST SEVEN YEARS

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IT is not to be expected that we should write the story of our own personal ministry, this must be left to other pens, if it be thought worthwhile to write it at all. We could not turn these pages into an autobiography, nor could we very well ask any one else to write about us, and therefore we shall simply give bare facts and extracts from the remarks of others.

On one of the last Sabbaths of the month of December, 1853, C. H. Spurgeon, being then nineteen years of age, preached in New Park Street Chapel in response to an invitation which, very much to his surprise, called him away from a loving people in Waterbeach near Cambridge, to supply a London pulpit. The congregation was a mere handful. The chapel seemed very large to the preacher and very gloomy, but he stayed himself on the Lord and delivered his message from James 1:17. There was an improvement even on the first evening and the place looked more cheerful. The text was, "They are without fault before the throne of God."

In answer to earnest requests, C. H. Spurgeon agreed to preach in London on the first, third, and fifth Sundays in January, 1854, but before the last of these Sabbaths, he had received an invitation, dated January 25, inviting him to occupy the pulpit for six months upon probation. The reply to this invitation will be found entire in Mr. Pike's "*Sketches of Nonconformity in Southwark.*"

The six months' probation was never fulfilled, for there was no need. The place was filling, the prayer meetings were full of power, and conversion was going on. A requisition for a special meeting, signed by fifty of the male members was sent in to the deacons on April 12, and according to the church book it was on April 19, resolved unanimously, "that we tender our brother, the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, a most cordial and affectionate invitation forthwith to become pastor of this church, and we pray that the result of his services may be owned of God with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit and a revival of religion in our midst, that it may be fruitful in the conversion of sinners and in the edification of those that believe."

To this there was but one reply, and it was therefore answered in the affirmative in a letter dated 75, Dover Road, April 28, 1854, also inserted in Mr. Pike's book, which can be had of our publishers.

In a very short time the congregation so multiplied as to make the chapel in the evening, when the gas was burning, like the black-hole of Calcutta. One evening in 1854 the preacher exclaimed, "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down and by faith this wall at the back shall come down too." An aged and prudent deacon in somewhat domineering terms observed to him at the close of the sermon, "Let us never hear of that again." "What do you mean?" said the preacher, "you will hear no more about it *when it is done*, and therefore the sooner you set about doing it the better." A meeting was held, and a fund was commenced, and in due course the vestries and schools were laid into the chapel and a new school room was erected along the side of the chapel, with windows which could be let down to allow those who were seated in the school to hear the preacher. While this was being done, worship was carried on at Exeter Hall, from February 11, 1855, to May 27 of the same year. At this time paragraphs began to appear in the papers announcing that the Strand was blocked up by crowds who gathered to hear a young man in Exeter Hall. Remarks of no very flattering character appeared in various journals and the multitude was thereby increased. Caricatures, such as "Brimstone and Treacle," adorned the print sellers' windows, the most ridiculous stories were circulated, and the most cruel lies invented, but all these things worked together for good. The great Lord blessed the Word more and more to the conversion of the hearers, and Exeter Hall was thronged throughout the whole time of our sojourn.

To return to New Park Street, enlarged though it was, resembled the attempt to put the sea into a teapot. We were more inconvenienced than ever. To turn many hundreds away was the general if not the universal necessity, and those who gained admission were but little better off, for the packing was dense in the extreme, and the heat something terrible even to remember. Our enemies continued to make our

name more and more known by penny pamphlets and letters in the papers, which all tended to swell the crowd. More caricatures appeared and among the rest "Catch-'em-alive-O!"

In June, 1856, we were again at Exeter Hall, preaching there in the evening and at the chapel in the morning, but this was felt to be inconvenient, and therefore in August a fund was commenced to provide for the erection of a larger house of prayer. Meanwhile the Exeter Hall proprietors intimated that they were unable to let their hall continuously to one congregation, and therefore we looked about us for another place. Most opportunely a large hall, in the Royal Surrey Gardens, was just completed for the monster concerts of M. Jullien, and with some trembling at the magnitude of the enterprise, this hall was secured for Sabbath evenings.

We find the following entry in the church book—"Lord's-day, October 19, 1856. On the evening of this day, in accordance with the resolution passed at the Church meeting, October 6, the church and congregation assembled to hear our pastor in the Music Hall of the Royal Surrey Gardens. A very large number of persons (about 7,000) were assembled on that occasion, and the service was commenced in the usual way, by singing, reading the Scriptures, and prayer. Just, however, after our Pastor had commenced his prayer, a disturbance was caused (as it is supposed, by some evil-disposed persons acting in concert), and the whole congregation were seized with a sudden panic. This caused a fearful rush to the doors, particularly from the galleries. Several persons, either in consequence of their heedless haste or from the extreme pressure of the crowd behind, were thrown down on the stone steps of the north-west staircase and were trampled on by the crowd pressing upon them. The lamentable result was that seven persons lost their lives and twenty-eight were removed to the hospitals seriously bruised and injured. Our pastor, not being aware that any loss of life had occurred, continued in the pulpit, endeavoring by every means in his power to alleviate the fear of the people, and was successful to a very considerable extent. In attempting to renew the service, it was found that the people were too excited to listen to him and the service was closed, and the people who remained dispersed quietly. This lamentable circumstance produced very serious effects on the nervous system of our pastor. He was entirely prostrated for some days and compelled to relinquish his preaching engagements. Through the great mercy of our heavenly Father he was however, restored so as to be able to occupy the pulpit in our own chapel on Sunday, October 31, and gradually recovered his usual health and vigor. 'The Lord's name be praised!'

"The church desire to note this event in their minutes, and to record their devout thankfulness to God, that in this sad calamity the lives of their beloved pastor, the deacons, and members were all preserved, and also with the hope that our heavenly Father from this seeming evil may produce the greatest amount of real lasting good."

This was the way in which this great affliction was viewed by our church, but we had, in addition to the unutterable pain of the whole catastrophe, to bear the wicked accusations of the public press. We will give only one specimen; it is taken from a popular newspaper which has long been most friendly to us, and therefore we will not mention names. In the days of its ignorance it said—"Mr. Spurgeon is a preacher who hurls damnation at the heads of his sinful hearers. Some men there are who, taking their precepts from Holy Writ, would beckon erring souls to a rightful path with fair words and gentle admonition. Mr. Spurgeon would take them by the nose and bully them into religion. Let us set up a barrier to the encroachments and blasphemies of men like Spurgeon, saying to them, 'Thus far shall you come and no further.' Let us devise some powerful means which shall tell to the thousands who now stand in need of enlightenment—this man, in his own opinion, is a righteous Christian, but in ours nothing more than a ranting charlatan. We are neither straight-laced nor Sabbatarian in our sentiments, but we would keep apart, widely apart, the theater and the church—above all, would we place in the hand of every right-thinking man, a whip to scourge from society the authors of such vile blasphemies as on Sunday night, above the cries of the dead and the dying, and louder than the wails of misery from the maimed and suffering, resounded from the mouth of Mr. Spurgeon in the Music Hall of the Surrey Gardens."

A fund was raised to help the poor sufferers and to avoid all fear of further panic the preacher resolved to hold the service in the morning, though that part of the day is least favorable to large congregations. The multitude came however and continued still to come for three good years. All classes came, both high and low. We have before us a list of the nobility who attended the Music Hall, but as we never felt any great elation at their attendance or cared to have their presence blazoned abroad, we will not insert the names. It was a far greater joy to us that hundreds came who were led to seek the Lord and to find eternal life in Him.

A famous letter, signed *Habitans in Sicco* and dated from Broad Phylactery, Westminster, appeared at this period in the "*Times*," and as it was known to be written by an eminent scholar it produced a very favorable impression. Part of the letter ran as follows—

"I want to hear Spurgeon; let us go." Now, I am supposed to be a high Churchman, so I answered, "What! go and hear a Calvinist—a Baptist!—a man who ought to be ashamed of himself for being so near the church and yet not within its pale?" "Never mind, come and hear him." "Well, we went yesterday morning to the Music Hall, in the Surrey Gardens. . . Fancy a congregation consisting of 10,000 souls, streaming into the Hall, mounting the galleries, humming, buzzing, and swarming—a mighty hive of bees—eager to secure at first the best places, and at last, any place at all. After waiting more than half an hour—for if you wish to have a seat you must be there at least that space of time in advance—Mr. Spurgeon ascended his tribune. To the hum, and rush, and trampling of men, succeeded a low, concentrated thrill and murmur of devotion, which seemed to run at once like an electric current, through the breast of everyone present, and by this magnetic chain, the preacher held us fast bound for about two hours. It is not my purpose to give a summary of his discourse. It is enough to say of his voice, that its power and volume are sufficient to reach everyone in that vast assembly. Of his language, that it is neither high-flown nor homely. Of his style, that it is at times familiar, at times declamatory, but always happy and often eloquent. Of his doctrine, that neither the Calvinist nor the Baptist appears in the forefront of the battle which is waged by Mr. Spurgeon with relentless animosity, and with Gospel weapons, against irreligion, cant, hypocrisy, pride, and those secret bosom sins which so easily beset a man in daily life, and to sum up all in a word, it is enough to say of the man himself, that he impresses you with a perfect conviction of his sincerity.

"But I have not written so much about my children's want of spiritual food when they listened to the mumbling of the Archbishop of _____, and my own banquet at the Surrey Gardens, without a desire to draw a practical conclusion from these two stories and to point them by a moral. Here is a man not more Calvinistic than many an incumbent of the Established Church, who 'humbles and mumbles,' as old Latimer says, over his liturgy and text—here is a man who says the complete immersion, or something of the kind, of adults is necessary to Baptism. These are his faults of doctrine, but if I were the examining chaplain of the Archbishop of _____, I would say, 'May it please your grace, here is a man able to preach eloquently, able to fill the largest church in England with his voice, and what is more to the purpose, with people. And may it please your grace, here are two churches in the metropolis, St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey. What does your grace think of inviting Mr. Spurgeon, this heretical Calvinist and Baptist, who is able to draw 10,000 souls after him, just to try his voice, some Sunday morning, in the nave of either of those churches?'"

Meanwhile the collection of funds for a new building went on and in January, 1858, the money in hand was £6100, by January, 1859, it was £9,639, and £5,000 of it was set aside to pay for the ground near the Elephant and Castle. We went plodding on, the pastor collecting personally, or by his sermons, very much of the money, traveling far and wide to do so; Scotch friends especially helping, till in January, 1860, after the first stone had been laid, £16,868 was in hand, or more than half of the sum required, so that the land had been paid for and installments paid to the builder as required. The first stone of the Metropolitan Tabernacle was laid with great rejoicings August 16, 1859, by Sir Morton Peto, but as a report of the whole proceedings can be procured of our publishers we will say but little here. We feel constrained however, to mention the singular providence which placed Mr. Spicer and

other friends upon the Court of the Fishmongers' Company, so as to secure the land. Next, the fact that the company was able to sell the freehold, and next, that the late Mr. William Joynson, of Mary Cray, deposited the amount to pay for an Act of Parliament to enable the company to sell in case it had turned out that they had not the legal power to do so. Singularly happy also was the circumstance that a gentleman in Bristol, who had never heard the pastor, nevertheless gave no less a sum than £5,000 towards the building. Eternity alone can reveal all the generous feeling and self-denying liberality evinced by Christian people in connection with this enterprise—to us at any rate so gigantic at the time that apart from divine aid we could never have carried it through. One of the chief of our mercies was the fact that our beloved brother, William Higgs, was our builder, and treated us with unbounded liberality throughout the whole affair. He is now a worthy deacon of our church.

In December, 1859, we left the Surrey Music Hall. We paid the company a large sum for our morning service, and this was the only amount out of which a dividend was paid. They proposed to open the gardens for amusement on the Lord's-day evening and we threatened to give up our tenancy if they did so. This prevented the evil for some time, but at length the baser sort prevailed, and under the notion that Sunday "pleasure" would prove remunerative, they advertised that the gardens would be opened on the Sabbath. We therefore felt bound in honor to leave the place and we did so. After a while a fire almost destroyed the building and the relics were for years turned into a hospital. We commenced on December 18, 1859, our third and longest sojourn at Exeter Hall, which ended on March 1, 1861. A few of our remarks upon leaving that place may fitly be quoted here.

"In the providence of God we, as a church and people, have had to wander often. This is our third sojourn within these walls. It is now about to close. We have had at all times and seasons a compulsion for moving; sometimes a compulsion of conscience, at other times a compulsion of pleasure, as on this occasion. I am sure that when we first went to the Surrey Music Hall, God went with us. Satan went too, but he fled before us. That frightful calamity, the impression of which can never be erased from my mind, turned out in the providence of God to be one of the most wonderful means of turning public attention to special services, and I do not doubt that—fearful catastrophe though it was—it has been the mother of multitudes of blessings. The Christian world noted the example and saw its later success. They followed it and to this day, in the theater and in the cathedral, the Word of Christ is preached where it was never preached before. In each of our movings we have had reason to see the hand of God and here particularly, for many residents in the West End have in this place come to listen to the Word, who probably might not have taken a journey beyond the river. Here God's Grace has broken hard hearts, here have souls been renewed and wanderers reclaimed. 'Give unto the LORD, O you mighty, give unto the LORD glory and strength. Give unto the LORD the glory due unto His name.' And now we journey to the house which God has in so special a manner given to us, and this day would I pray as Moses did, 'Rise up, LORD, and let your enemies be scattered; and let them that hate you flee before you.'"

Under date January 6, 1861, there stands in our records the following solemn declaration, signed by the pastor and leading friends—"This church needs rather more than £4,000 to enable it to open the New Tabernacle free of all debt. It humbly asks this temporal mercy of God, and believes that for Jesus' sake the prayer will be heard and the boon bestowed. As witness our hands."

Now let the reader mark that, on May 6 of the same year, the pastor and many friends also signed their names to another testimony, which is worded as follows—"We, the undersigned members of the church lately worshipping in New Park Street Chapel, but now assembling in the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, desire with overflowing hearts to make known and record the lovingkindness of our faithful God. We asked in faith, but our Lord has exceeded our desires, for not only was the whole sum given us, but far sooner than we had looked for it. Truly the Lord is good and worthy to be praised. We are ashamed of ourselves that we have ever doubted Him, and we pray that as a church and as individuals we may be enabled to trust in the Lord at all times with confidence, so that in quietness we

may possess our souls. To Father, Son, and Holy Ghost we offer praise and thanksgiving, and we set to our seal that God is true.”

After about a month of Opening Services, of which a full account can be had of our publishers, we began regular work at the Tabernacle in May, 1861, the whole building being *free of debt* and the accounts showing that £31,332 4s. 10d. had been received and the same amount expended. Truly we serve a gracious God.

Taken from The C. H. Spurgeon Collection, Version 1.0, Ages Software. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.