

Brimstone and Treacle: Charles Spurgeon's Humor in the Teaching of Preaching

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Abstract: *While Charles Spurgeon's use of humor in his preaching has been well-documented, his use of wit in the teaching of preaching to students at his Pastor's College in London has been largely ignored. This article surveys his lighthearted approach to the teaching of preaching technique as seen in humorous anecdotes, sarcastic descriptions, and amusing illustrations. It concludes with a brief admonition for modern preaching textbook authors to follow Spurgeon's lead in the use of humor in their work.*

The late nineteenth-century preacher, and perhaps first mega-church pastor, Charles Spurgeon's sense of humor, both in and outside of the pulpit, was well known.¹ One of the best known is Spurgeon the preacher's witty advice to his students at The Pastor's College. He spoke to preachers in training about the art of preaching, and although it has received little attention by modern scholars, the humor in his *Lectures to My Students*² is unmistakable. The purpose of this article is to consider the ways in which Spurgeon used humor in his advice to students with a view toward gaining insight for modern authors of preaching textbooks.

Guides for developing and delivering sermons have been available in English for almost 300 years,³ and have been printed in abundance since the 1850s. In many ways, Spurgeon's *Lectures* reflect the same concerns that one finds in the majority of preaching manuals: proper respect for the subject matter, the importance of study, seriousness in forming the sermon, proper choice of illustrations, elocution, and so on. Like his contemporaries, Spurgeon showed a familiarity with other preaching guides, and with classical oratory and rhetoric. However, the wit and, at times, biting sarcasm reflected in his manual sets it apart from contemporary and modern sermon-development books. Considering Spurgeon's thoughtful philosophy of the use of humor in the pulpit, it is no surprise that he also used the medium to convey his wisdom to his students. Spurgeon explained his design in using humor in preaching:

It is a sort of tradition of the fathers that it is wrong to laugh on Sundays. The eleventh commandment is, that we are to love one another; and then, according to some people, the twelfth is, "Thou shalt pull a long face on Sunday." I must confess that I would rather hear people laugh than I would see them asleep in the house of God; and I would rather get the truth into them through the medium of ridicule than I would have it neglected, or leave the people to perish through lack of reception of the message. I do believe, in my heart, that there may be as much holiness in a laugh as in a cry; and that, sometimes, to

¹ See chapter eighty-one entitled "Pure Fun" in volume 3 of Spurgeon's *The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon Compiled from His Diary: 1856–1878* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1900), 338–361. My favorite in this chapter (p. 342) involves Spurgeon's response to a critic who inquired as to the reason for Mr. Spurgeon being late for his sermon. Spurgeon explained that he had to stop to vote: "'To vote!' exclaimed the good man; 'but, my dear brother, I thought you were a citizen of the New Jerusalem!' 'So I am,' replied Mr. Spurgeon, 'but my old man is a Citizen of this world.' 'Ah! but you should mortify your old man.' 'That is exactly what I did; for my old man is a Tory, and I made him vote for the Liberals!'"

² 3 vols. (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1875–1897)

³ The earliest monograph in English I have found devoted to sermon preparation and delivery is Blaise Gisbert, *Christian Eloquence in Theory and Practice* (London: H. Clements, 1718).

laugh is the better thing of the two, for I may weep, and be murmuring, and repining, and thinking all sorts of bitter thoughts against God; while, at another time, I may laugh the laugh of sarcasm against sin, and so evince a holy earnestness in the defense of the truth. I do not know why ridicule is to be given up to Satan as a weapon to be used against us, and not to be employed by us as a weapon against him.⁴

What follows is a description of Spurgeon's playful advice given not *while* preaching but *about* preaching, specifically the delivery of the sermon. Before *Lectures* was a book it was, of course, a series of lectures given to students of The Pastor's College, founded by Spurgeon. In general, Spurgeon's manual provided little humor when it came to sincerity, devotion, piety, and study. His comedic skills were evident, however, when he dealt with technique: use of the voice, posture, action, gestures, and gaining the attention of the congregation. Occasionally the printer would insert remarks about the difficulty of replicating a sound or movement, indicating that Spurgeon's remarks were being taken down as lectured. Spurgeon at times referred his students to illustrations that were later provided in the book, indicating that he had worked with an artist before the lecture to render an image to be shown during the lecture.

On the Voice

Following his practical advice about using a natural, manly tone in preaching, Spurgeon took aim at what he called that "dignified, doctoral, inflated bombastic style," which he deemed "*ore rotunda*." Of note is the printer's parenthetical insertion that he could not find a proper way to express the mocking nature of Spurgeon's voice at this point: "Unfortunately the Lecturer (*sic*) could not be here reported by any known form of letter-press, as he proceeded to read a hymn with a round, rolling, swelling voice."⁵ Next Spurgeon decried the "very lady-like, mincing, delicate, servant-girlified, dawdling" style that some preachers displayed in the pulpit, though they would never think of using such contrived tones and language in their own parlors. While most Americans (and some Britons) might assume a nineteenth century Englishman at home would say something like, "Will you be so good as to give me another cup of tea; I take sugar, if you please," Spurgeon opined that a man "would make himself ludicrous if he did so."⁶ Spurgeon's concern that the preacher be respectful, yet avoid being artificial, meant that the minister should be careful not to take on a different persona when in the pulpit.

Spurgeon next admonished his students to acknowledge their idiosyncrasies in speech and learn to avoid them. He advised that the strong accents to be found throughout England (singling out Yorkshire and Somersetshire), though they could have their own beauty, should be modified for the sake of the hearers. Squeaky voices, "like a rusty pair of scissors," were to be eschewed, as were mumbling "sepulchral tones" which amounted to "ventriloquizing most horribly."

Having cautioned against regional dialects in England, Spurgeon then critiqued his fellow Londoners. His varied audience from all over the English-speaking world would have been amused at his next statements:

⁴ Spurgeon, *The Art of Illustration* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1897), 43.

⁵ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 1, 119.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

Should an American student be present he must excuse my pressing this remark upon his attention. Abhor the practice of some men, who will not bring out the letter ‘r,’ such a habit is ‘vewy wuinous and wediculous, vewy wetched and wepwehensible.’⁷

Spurgeon was not mocking a speech impediment – Americans will probably think of Elmer Fudd and Britons Monty Python’s Caesar in *The Life of Brian* – but a common dialect variation linguists call labiodental /ɹ/. It persists in parts of (particularly eastern) London today, but can be found in other parts of the UK and the greater English-speaking world. In late-nineteenth century London it was apparently associated with lower-middle class Cockney, as opposed to the working class Cockney dialect.⁸

On a serious note, Spurgeon offered advice to prevent “*dysphonia clericorum*, or ‘Clergyman’s sore throat.’” Any preacher who used a monotonous tone would, in addition to putting the congregation to sleep, risk bringing on bronchitis. He claimed to have spoken to surgeons who verified the *dysphonia* problem among the clergy, but the bronchitis seen among the preachers in the Church of England was different from that of the Dissenters because of their styles of speech. His sarcastic wit was evidenced again in mimicking the “ecclesiastical twang” of Church of England preachers, with its “steeple-in-the-throat grandeur”:

It may be illustrated by the following specimen. “He that hath yaws to yaw, let him yaw,” which is a remarkable, if not impressive, rendering of a Scripture text.⁹

At length, he advised his students to prepare and take care of their voices. He even offered the kind of advice modern preachers still hear about various home and folk remedies. While the effectiveness of these treatments may be doubtful today, the serious business of preserving his voice was surely a concern for Spurgeon, who preached several times per week over the course of many decades.

Attention

In his next lecture, Spurgeon turned to the matter of keeping the congregation’s attention. He included the customary advice of using captivating and succinct introductions, as well as of avoiding unnecessary repetition. A key to catching the hearers’ interest was in recognizing the intellectual capacity of the audience. He quipped, “Go up to his level if he is a poor man; go down to his level if he is an educated person.” He acknowledged the smiles on the faces of his students at this remark, but indicated that he was not confused in his statement because there is more difficulty “going down... to the illiterate than there is in being refined for the polite.”¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 121.

⁸ See Joan C. Beal, “‘To Explain the Present’: Nineteenth-century Evidence for ‘recent’ changes in English pronunciation,” *Of Varying Language and Opposing Creed: New Insights Into Late Modern English*, eds. Javier Pérez Guerra and Dolores González-Álvarez (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 42–43. Beal documents the growing use of labiodental /ɹ/ in modern England. In general, the labiodental /ɹ/ is now associated with several parts of southeastern England where “Estuary English” is common. See Ulrike Altendorf, *Estuary English: Levelling at the Interface of RP and South-Eastern British English* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2003), 177.

⁹ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 1, 128. The quotation is perhaps best imagined as “He that hath *eahs* to *heah*, let him *heah*.” One can appreciate the difficulty faced by the printer when attempting to replicate this biting humor.

¹⁰ Ibid., 141.

He further warned against using a manuscript when preaching, because even the best of sermons Spurgeon had heard read from the page still “tasted of paper,” an unfortunate truth because “my digestion is not good enough to dissolve foolscap.”¹¹ To Spurgeon, a major Achilles heel to many sermons was their great length. He assured his students that ordinary folk will, after a period of around forty minutes, begin to think of other pressing matters. For example, a young mother will begin to worry about her baby, or the fire at home. He provided the following anecdote:

In some country places, in the afternoon especially, the farmers have to milk their cows, and one farmer bitterly complained to me about a young man — I think from this College “Sir, he ought to have given over at four o’clock, but he kept on till half-past, and there were all my cows waiting to be milked! How would he have liked it if he had been a cow?” There was a great deal of sense in that question. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals ought to have prosecuted that young sinner. How can farmers hear to profit when they have cows-on-the-brain?¹²

Anyone familiar with the behavior of a full milk cow knows that a farmer has good reason to keep his schedule. Surely, the threat of the SPCA provoked laughter in this lecture!

Impromptu Speech

Spurgeon also included a lecture on impromptu sermons, which he urged his students to generally avoid giving. He advocated patient prayer, preparation and meditation before presenting sermons, but admitted that there were times when an unplanned sermon must be given. Spurgeon’s primary argument against impromptu speaking was his assessment that most people are not very good at it. One wholesale exception to this lack of talent for ad-lib was the guild of lawyers, who were required to adapt their arguments as lines of inquiry changed. Spurgeon only begrudgingly complimented barristers, granting them this one admirable characteristic of the talent extemporaneous speech – “They should have some virtues!” However, he stopped himself from offering too much praise for the profession by interjecting an anecdote about a recent court case. A citizen had been indicted for “the horrible crime” of libel against a lawyer. Spurgeon considered such an event preposterous, and was dumbfounded that the lawyer had the nerve to present such a case. Spurgeon’s lack of respect for the legal profession was evident in these sardonic remarks:

[I]t is well for him that I was not his judge, for had such a difficult and atrocious crime been fairly brought home to him, I would have delivered him over to be cross-examined during the term of his natural life, hoping for mercy’s sake that it might be a brief one.¹³

Instead of having the gift of unplanned oratory that most lawyers displayed, Spurgeon worried that most preachers were nearer in their abilities in this regard to speakers in the House of Commons. Although some politicians certainly had powerful public-speaking gifts, the vast majority droned unintelligibly:

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 144.

¹³ Ibid., 154.

Let it be proposed that when capital punishment is abolished, those who are found guilty of murder shall be compelled to listen to a selection of the dreariest parliamentary orators. The members of the Royal Humane Society forbid. 232

It is remarkable to think of Spurgeon finding ways to humorously intertwine mention of the death penalty with dull preaching! The remainder of the lecture offered practical advice to his students who might need to learn to preach extemporaneously. Still, Spurgeon warned about the temptation to overestimate one's ability to speak wisely off the cuff with the result being "elongated nonsense, paraphrastic platitude, wire-drawn commonplace, or sacred rodomontade." He closed by invoking the character Snug from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Snug, who by trade was a carpenter, was asked to act the part of a lion in a play, but was worried that he would forget his lines. As Spurgeon quoted, the lion's lines were no bother because "you may do it extempore, for it is nothing but roaring."¹⁴

Posture, Action, and Gesture

The preceding lectures can be found in the first published volume of Spurgeon's *Lectures*.



PAUL PREACHING AT ATHENS,
AFTER RAPHAEL

In volume two,¹⁵ in a similar vein to the lecture on the voice, Spurgeon advised young preachers to avoid distracting motions and bad habits in the pulpit. He sympathized with those who had to preach from traditional pulpits (versus platforms) because of the difficulty presented by their constriction. He contrasted Italian Renaissance artist Raphael's powerful depiction of Paul preaching at Athens with the very stiff, tongue-in-cheek "Very Reverend Dr. Paul in London":



THE VERY REVEREND DR. PAUL
PREACHING IN LONDON

¹⁴ Ibid., 165.

¹⁵ Citations are from the New York: Robert Carter and Bros., 1889 edition.

What was wrong with pulpits? First, Spurgeon said that all pulpits are ugly:

A deep wooden pulpit of the old sort might well remind a minister of his mortality, for it is nothing but a coffin set on end: but on what rational ground do we bury our pastors alive? Many of these erections resemble barrels, others are of the fashion of egg cups and wine glasses; a third class were evidently modeled after corn bins upon four legs; and yet a fourth variety can only be likened to swallows' nests stuck upon the walls.¹⁶

But even worse than their appearance were the problems pulpits created for the speaker. Lighted lamps with reflectors were normally placed on either side of the preacher (see the Very Reverend Dr. Paul figure above), thus providing plentiful light for the Bible to be read and unwelcome heat to the minister's head. Additionally, pulpits provided mere ledges upon which to sit, often with the door handle positioned in the preacher's back. Further, the depth of such pulpits assumed a tall speaker would occupy them:

They are generally so deep that a short person like myself can scarcely see over the top of them, and when I ask for something to stand upon they bring me a hassock (a padded stool for kneeling). Think of a minister of the gospel poising himself upon a hassock while he is preaching: a Boanerges and a Blondin¹⁷ in one person. It is too much to expect us to keep the balance of our minds and the equilibrium of our bodies at the same time.¹⁸

He recounted a time when he was preaching on the text 'We are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed,' only at that moment for the hassock upon which he was standing to give way. The result was that he almost spilled out of the pulpit onto the floor, much to the amusement of his congregation. He concluded that "boxed-up pulpits are largely accountable for the ungainly postures which some of our preachers assume."¹⁹

As all public speakers know, determining how to hold the hands when speaking can sometimes be difficult. Here, Spurgeon argued for a natural posture, without the need for gratuitous motions. He joked that many ministers who spoke with fists clinched looked like boxers:

Too many speakers appear to have taken lessons from Bendigo²⁰ or some other professor of the noble art of self-defense, for they hold their fists as if they were ready for a round. It is not pleasant to watch brethren preaching the gospel of peace in that pugnacious style; yet it is

¹⁶ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 2, 158–159.

¹⁷ Charles Blondin was a famous French tightrope artist in the late nineteenth century.

¹⁸ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 2, 161.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁰ Nickname for William Abednego Thompson, a famous English bare-knuckle boxer of the time.



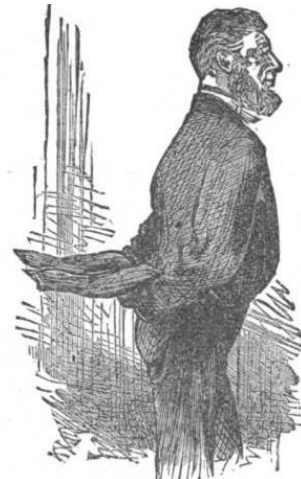
by no means rare to hear of an evangelist preaching a free Christ with a clinched fist. It is amusing to see them putting themselves into an attitude and saying, “Come unto me,” and then, with a revolution of both fists, “and I will give you — rest.”²¹

The accompanying illustration shows the comical way Spurgeon described these preachers, and his comment that, “I am not at all surprised at your laughing, but it is infinitely better that you should have a hearty laugh at these absurdities here than that your people should laugh at you in the future,” shows that his description garnered the desired result.

Spurgeon picked at preachers whose arm movements were overly mechanical, as well as those who pounded upon the pulpit to excess. While a preacher should demonstrate passion, he should never become so animated that his movements distracted his hearers from the message. He especially warned that the apparent tendency by some speakers of his time to “grasp a rail, and to drop down lower and lower till you almost touch the ground is supremely absurd.” That Spurgeon had overseen the preparation of the printed illustrations to accompany his lecture is obvious from his comment that the woodblock (see below), which was first carved and then used to stamp the image into the page, could scarcely relay the kind of squatting posture (“a prelude to a gymnastic feat”) he was describing.²²



The next illustration (to the right) was nearly as comical. Spurgeon told of a preacher who kept his hands behind his back, under his coat tails, as a sign of confidence. However, whenever he became excited he would begin to flap the coat tails “reminding the observer of a water-wagtail.” Spurgeon opined that, regardless of the gracefulness of a dress coat, the garment did nothing to add solemnity to the sermon when the tails were seen “protruding from the orator’s rear.”²³



²¹ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 2, 173–174.

²² *Ibid.*, 189.

²³ *Ibid.*, 190–191.

Other humorous postures to be avoided were:

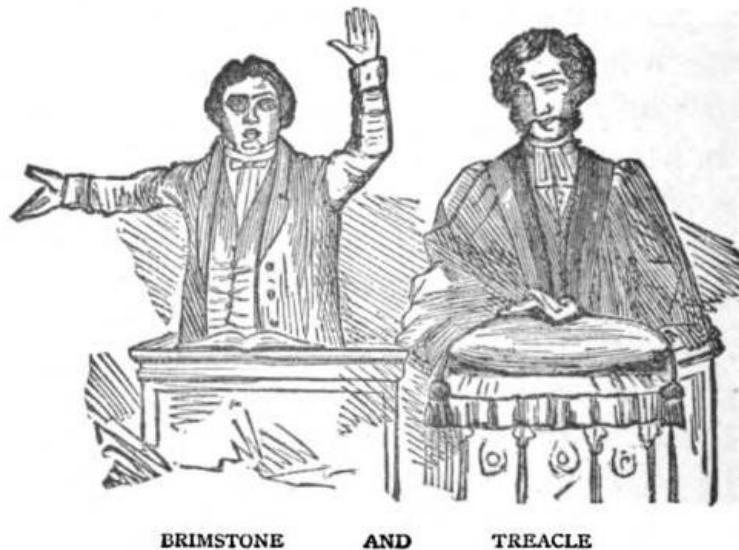


Placing the arms akimbo²⁴



Placing the thumbs in the arm holes of a waistcoat, or "The Penguin"²⁵

As far as dress was concerned, Spurgeon urged his students to worry less about fineries and more about their messages. He ridiculed "clerical foppishness" with all its dressiness and finely-combed hair. He included the next illustration when recounting how, twenty years earlier, a newspaper artist had dubbed him "Brimstone" and another "Jack-a-dandy" preacher as "Treacle" (see figure below).



Note Spurgeon's proud, common, disheveled look, sans traditional pulpit, and the delicate features and elegant wardrobe of Treacle. Spurgeon considered it an honor to have been lampooned by the press because of the stark contrast it provided between his down-to-earth,

²⁴ Ibid., 191.

²⁵ Ibid., 192.

intrepid presentation of the gospel and the tedious approach so often seen in Anglican churches.²⁶

Conclusion

To the modern reader, the presence of so many humorous images in a book on preaching may be surprising. Why is it that Spurgeon's preaching guide is replete with lighthearted anecdotes and images, when few others of the genre before or since attempt to teach through humor? In my own brief, unscientific survey of several of the common textbooks for university-level homiletics courses, while occasional quips or humorous intrusions into the text are made, the mood is typically very serious from beginning to end. I suggest there are at least two reasons for the uniqueness of Spurgeon's book. First, Spurgeon did not write the book, *per se*, but instead provided the lecture, which was given *ad hoc*, almost certainly without a manuscript at hand. A transcriber took down Spurgeon's remarks and delivered them to the publisher. Thus, Spurgeon's preaching personality came out in the lectures, and is still evident in the book. Second, Spurgeon's College was full of men who were generally not university material in late nineteenth-century England. Spurgeon's jocular attitude toward his students revealed a comfortability with his audience that an author of a modern preaching textbook would almost certainly not convey, especially in writing a college-level text. Spurgeon described his purpose for his colloquial and humorous approach to these lectures by explaining:

At the end of the week I meet the students, and find them weary with sterner studies, and I judge it best to be as lively and interesting in my prelections as I well can be. They have had their fill of classics, mathematics, and divinity, and are only in a condition to receive something which will attract and secure their attention, and fire their hearts... To succeed in this the lecturer must not be dull himself, nor demand any great effort from his audience.²⁷

While most professors do not write textbooks containing anything funny, humorous anecdotes and illustrations are often offered and encouraged by college-level preaching instructors in class during lectures. I suggest, following Spurgeon's lead, when modern scholars produce preaching guides, they consider including more of the humor found in their classrooms on the printed page. Of course, any modern text should offer humor appropriate to the very different circumstances from that of late nineteenth-century England. Who knows? Perhaps that textbook will receive mention 140 years later when contemporary works have been forgotten.

²⁶ Ibid., 200.

²⁷ Spurgeon, *Lectures*, vol. 1, Introduction, v.