

## **The Search for Real Christianity: Nineteenth-Century England**

For a number of lessons, we have been looking at church history in America. Now we go back to the continent of Europe and to England for this lesson. The prayer I will open with comes from the prayer book of the Church of England, from what is called “The Lesser Peace and Fast.” One of the celebration days on the church calendar of the Church of England has to do with a man whose name will come up in today’s lesson, Charles Simeon. On that particular day in the prayer book, this prayer relates to the life and testimony of Charles Simeon. So, as we begin this lesson, I would like for us to use this prayer, thanking the Lord for Simeon and other faithful ministers whom we will be talking about during this time. Let us pray.

*O loving Lord, we know that all things are ordered by Thine unswerving wisdom and unbounded love. Grant us in all things to see Thy hand, that following the example of Charles Simeon, we may walk with Christ with all simplicity and serve Thee with a quiet and contented mind through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and with the Holy Spirit—one God forever and ever. Amen.*

As we think about the history of Christianity in England in the nineteenth century, we begin, of course, with the Church of England, and we begin with the Broad Church. In one of Henry Fielding’s novels, he has a character who says this, “When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion and not only the Christian religion but the Protestant religion and not only the Protestant religion but the Church of England.” And that was probably the attitude of many people who were members of the church in England in the nineteenth century, particularly members of what was called the Broad Church or adherents to the Broad Church philosophy. The middle way of the Reformation period had become so wide that it appeared to some people to have no limits at all. “The Broad Church” or “latitudinarianism” was the word that was often used to describe this aspect of the life of the Church of England. There seemed to be no limits as to what a person could believe to be a part of that church. Perhaps the only limits were cultural limits. Someone has said that the Broad Church, the Church of England, was simply the Tory party at prayer. J. C. Ryle, an evangelical bishop whom I will mention a little later, said that one of the great dangers of the Church of England was to declare the church a kind of “Noah’s Ark” with every kind of opinion and creed being safe and undisturbed. The only terms of communion were a willingness to come inside and to leave your neighbor alone. Well, if that is a description of the Church of England in the early part of the nineteenth century, we can imagine that the church was not in very good condition at that time.

Also within the Church of England arose a new evangelical movement sometimes called the Low Church to contrast it with the Broad Church. It was low in the sense that the people who adhered to the evangelical movement did not place such high claims on church polity, the priesthood, the hierarchy, or the sacraments. The evangelical movement within the Church of England was created or at least greatly strengthened by the evangelical revival that we looked at earlier—the revival of Whitefield and Wesley. That movement was weakened by the departure of the Methodists who were, at first, part of the Church of England. They created evangelical attitudes and enthusiasm within the Church of England, but by then end of the eighteenth century they had pulled away and formed their own separate denomination.

Continuing within the Church of England and growing was a movement of church evangelicals. They were evangelicals who did not break with the Church of England to become Methodist Church evangelicals during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. John Newton, the slave trader who was converted, best represents this tradition. He became a Church of England minister and a great preacher, theologian, and hymn writer. He was the writer of the famous hymn, “Amazing Grace.” This

tradition was also greatly strengthened by a man whom Newton helped, a man named Thomas Scott. Scott was an Anglican clergyman who became an evangelical when he discovered (with Newton's help and the help of others) that the despised Methodist doctrines were really doctrines that could be found in the 39 Articles. Salvation by faith alone was something that Scott did not understand at first to be Anglican teaching. But he came to realize that he could and should embrace the teaching of the evangelicals. Thomas Scott became a Calvinist, according to his own words, because "the Bible will teach predestination, election, and final perseverance in spite of my twisting and expounding it to try to make it teach something else." Scott wrote a book, which is his testimony, called *The Force of Truth*. It is a wonderful book. In one section he tells about how he came to an evangelical conviction and a Calvinist conviction through the force of truth. Scott is particularly well known because of his commentary on the Bible. His commentary on the Bible was beloved and used by Christian people in England, America, and elsewhere throughout the entire century. William Cary first met Thomas Scott in 1779, the date of the publication of Scott's book, *The Force of Truth*. Years later, William Cary, the Baptist missionary in India, wrote, "If there be anything of the work of God in my soul, I owe much of it to his preaching when I first set out in the ways of the Lord."

So, Thomas Scott was a very influential member of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England as was the great Charles Simeon. Simeon was vicar of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge. It was a very famous church that had great Puritan preachers. Richard Sibbes and Thomas Goodwin had preached in the pulpit of Holy Trinity Church. Charles Simeon went there as a young man and spent 54 years as pastor of that church. That is a long time to stay at one place, but Simeon stayed in that one pulpit for his whole career as a minister. In the providence of God, he was able to train many students in Bible, theology, and preaching. He inspired many students with a zeal for missions. One of the students of Charles Simeon was Henry Martin, who went to India as a missionary. Simeon's sermon outlines were rather full. They were published in 21 volumes in 1832. There are 2536 sermons from Genesis to Revelation in that set. It is a book called *Horae Homileticae*. The title is in Latin but the sermons are in English. They are useful even to us today. Do not try to preach one of Simeon's sermons the way he did it. But after you have prepared a sermon, it might be interesting for you to check in this set of books to see how Charles Simeon did it.

Simeon was part of a group of people who met regularly in London. It is called the Clapham Sect. It is kind of an odd name. It sounds like a weird group, but these were not weird people. They were evangelicals in the Church of England. Clapham was a part of the city of London, and there was a church there. The pastor was John Ben. It became an evangelical center for Church of England people—people of influence, power, and prestige in the London area. John Ben, as pastor and guide, led this group of outstanding lay Christians who dedicated themselves to putting evangelical life into practice. The Clapham group is famous because these people were determined to take the truth of the Bible and apply it to the social conditions of England at that time.

The most famous member of the Clapham Sect was William Wilberforce. Wilberforce was a member of Parliament. He actually became a member of Parliament when he was 21 years old, before he was converted to evangelical Christianity. He converted by reading Philip Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. At first, he thought he should give up his political career and dedicate himself to study for the ministry. But friends persuaded the 25-year-old member of Parliament to stay within the Parliament and use his influence there. Wilberforce said, "God Almighty has put before me two great options: the abolition of the slave trade and the reformation of the manners" (by that he means the conduct or ethics of England). As a statesman, he gave his life trying to accomplish these two things, and he was successful, by God's blessing, in both. The slave trade in the British Empire ended in 1807. The emancipation of the slaves throughout the empire took place in 1833. Not all the credit goes to

Wilberforce, but a lot of it does. Much credit goes to him and the evangelicals of the Clapham Sect for their zealous and determined opposition to what they rightly saw as a very inhumane practice. In the year of John Wesley's death, he wrote a letter to Wilberforce, urging him to carry on in his crusade to end the slave trade and the practice of slavery. You can read the story from the other side—from the slaves themselves—in a little excerpt from the book *Cayman Emerges: A Human History of Long Ago Cayman* by S. O. Ebanks. Mr. Ebanks was a descendent of the Cayman slaves and an elder in Boatswain Bay Presbyterian Church in Boatswain Bay, Grand Cayman. Boatswain Bay Presbyterian Church was the first church that I served as a pastor. As a young man, fresh from Covenant Seminary, I went to the island and preached in that church. Mr. Ebanks was an elder there, and he wrote a book called *Cayman Emerges* in which he tells the story of the people of that island in the West Indies. It is a very interesting account of what happened on the island when the slaves were emancipated. There was a time of great celebration and rejoicing that lasted for two or three days. But what is particularly interesting is that, according to Ebanks, not only did the slaves celebrate but the slaves also invited the former slave masters, the master of the Church of England, and everybody on the island to celebrate.

Wilberforce set out to do two things. He wanted to see slavery ended, and that took place under God's enablement and blessing. He also wanted to see true Christianity practiced again among the middle and higher classes of England. He felt that Christianity was particularly misunderstood by those classes of people. He knew that because he was from the higher class, and he knew that to be a Christian at this time was to have a cultural Christianity and not what he considered a "real" Christianity. So, he wrote a book that was published in 1797 called *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in this Country Contrasted with Real Christianity*. Sometimes Wilberforce's book is called *A Practical View*, but I think a better title is *Real Christianity* because that is what Wilberforce set out to do. In this book, he stirred the consciences of thousands of people who for the first time saw what real Christianity was. They had been exposed to the shallowness and deceitfulness of a professing Christianity, which was merely nominal. It was almost untouched by the leaven of a living faith. In both of Wilberforce's great goals, God enabled him to make an impact on history and on the world. William Meade, who was later bishop of the Episcopal Church in Virginia, recalled vividly seeing Wilberforce's book in the hands of his family when he was a boy. He marked the blessed change in Virginia from a latitudinarian attitude to an evangelical diocese from the time that Wilberforce's book appeared.

From this history including Thomas Scott, Charles Simeon, William Wilberforce and others of the nineteenth century, an evangelical party was created within the Church of England. It later embraced people like J. C. Ryle, who became the first bishop of Liverpool. He was a Calvinist theologian who is still read with great profit. It also embraced the bishop of Durham, Handley C. G. Moule, known for his spiritual writings and his participation in the English Keswick Convention, which was created for the promotion of practical holiness. People like J. I. Packer, John Stott, and Dick Lucas are representatives in the modern church of the Evangelical Party of the Church of England.

J. C. Ryle said that there were two great problems that he thought faced the Church of England. The first was the Broad Church that was just like Noah's Ark in that it took in everybody and everything without making any kind of doctrinal statement or requirement. The second danger facing the Church of England, according to Bishop Ryle, was to un-Protestantize the Church of England. So, at the same time as the Broad Church movement and the evangelical movement, there was another movement called Anglo-Catholicism or High Church. Anglicans sometimes make a joke about all of this. They say, "Broad Church: broad and hazy; Low Church: low and lazy; High Church: high and crazy." Well, I did not say that; it is an Anglican joke. It does not describe these groups very fairly, but it does let us know there were three groups in the Church of England in the nineteenth century.

The Anglo-Catholic movement began during the first half of the nineteenth century. It is sometimes called the Oxford Movement. It is called that because many of the leaders of this movement centered at Oxford. The evangelicals tended to center at Cambridge because of Charles Simeon being there. But the Anglo-Catholics or the High Church Episcopalians were at Oxford. This same movement is also called the Tractarian movement. So you can think of High Church, Anglo-Catholicism, the Oxford Movement, or the Tractarian movement. They are all the same thing. This movement is called the Tractarian movement because the leaders produced a number of tracts—short publications—that they published and sent out in order to win support for their cause. All of this was an attempt, in Ryle's rather awkward word, to un-Protestantize the Church of England and bring it much more in line with the Catholic Church. One of the leaders of the Oxford Movement said, "I hate the Reformation, and I hate the Reformers." It was a Protestant member of the Church of England who said that, but it dramatically captures the direction of the Oxford Movement. Among these people there was a yearning for tradition, for mystery in worship, and for beauty and antiquity in worship. The services of the churches influenced by the High Church tradition began to include the use of incense, the wearing of particular vestments such as stoles, and the use of candles. You could almost tell a High Church just by walking into the church and then particularly if you were present for one of the services. There was a desire for continuity in the church. Apostolic succession became important. Any kind of break such as represented by the Protestant Reformation was an anathema. And there was a desire for unity in doctrine. There was a great emphasis on the adoration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Many of the Anglo-Catholics began to emphasize the importance of clerical celibacy.

So, many of the attitudes and expressions of Roman Catholicism invaded the Church of England through the High Church movement. All of this led many High Church people, or at least some of them, beyond the limits of the Church of England into the Roman Catholic Church, including two of the sons of the evangelical, William Wilberforce, who became Roman Catholics. The most famous convert of all was John Henry Newman, who entered the Roman Catholic Church in 1845, having struggled a long time to stay in the Church of England but finally deciding that he could not. His *Apologia pro Vita Sua* defense or apology for his life explains the steps that Henry Newman, who later became a cardinal in the Catholic Church, took as he moved from Protestantism to Catholicism. One of the things he said in that book was "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant." I hope that is not true. I do not think it is. But John Henry Newman felt there were many things tugging him into the fellowship of the Church of Rome. When he finally became a Catholic, he described it this way: "It was like coming into a harbor after a rough and stormy voyage."

The Church of England does not divide. It has a hard time dividing. Presbyterians divide; the Church of England stays the same but creates parties within the church. From that period all the way down to the present, you can find a very distinct group of people in each of these parties: the Broad Church, the Low Church, and the High Church. Not everybody in England was a member of the Church of England. Of course there were non-conformists as well. They were people who, after the glorious revolution, had decided not to become part of the established church but to continue the tradition of the descenders. These were the heirs of the Puritans—the Congregationalists, the Presbyterians, and the Baptists. Unfortunately, there was not a great deal of life in any of these groups. There were evangelicals and Bible-believing people in all of them, but these descenders had lost much of the fervor and orthodoxy of their forbearers. Presbyterians were beginning to completely disappear from England. Eventually many of the Independents and the Presbyterians would unite in a Reformed church. So, the name "Presbyterian" is almost unknown in England now, except for a few Presbyterians connected with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Wales, and a few churches connected with the International Presbyterian Church in several different locations in England. (The International Presbyterian Church came out of the L'Abri Fellowship in England.)

In the nineteenth century, the brightest hope among the non-conformists was the Baptist church. The greatest of the Baptists was Charles Haddon Spurgeon, one of the great preachers of English history. Sometimes people say Latimer, Whitefield, and Spurgeon were the three greatest English preachers.

You know the story of Spurgeon. He preached to thousands for a long period of time at his Metropolitan Tabernacle in London. His sermons were published and sent overseas so that people in New York could read Spurgeon's sermons on Monday after he had preached them on Sunday. His influence extended to English-speaking people all over the world. The well-known Spurgeon was a great preacher. People do not know as well the other side of Spurgeon, what Iain Murray calls "the forgotten Spurgeon," and that is the theologian and doctrinal preacher. He was a popular and powerful preacher, but Spurgeon was also a great doctrinal preacher. He defended the Reformed faith against Arminianism, and then he defended the Protestant faith against a resurgent Catholicism such as represented in the Oxford Movement. In one of his sermons he said, "We want John Knox back again. Do not talk to me of mild and gentle men of soft manners and squeamish words. We want the fiery Knox. Even though his vehemence should ding our pulpits into blabs it were well if he did but rouse our hearts to action." That is what people at Metropolitan Tabernacle were hearing. There is no High Church doctrine here, just a call for Knox to return and reform the church once again.

Finally, Spurgeon found himself in a struggle to defend the evangelical faith against a watered-down philosophy that he thought was influencing his own Baptist church. That was called the Downgrade Controversy. It was Spurgeon versus his fellow Baptists. Spurgeon was talking to one of these Baptists friends one day and he said, "Clifford, I cannot really see why you do not come to my way of thinking"—that is, the evangelical, Calvinist theology. Mr. Clifford, a Baptist preacher, said, "Well, Mr. Spurgeon, I only see you once a month, but I read my Bible every day." It was a clever answer, but it was not long before Clifford was sliding away from orthodoxy in the Downgrade Controversy. Spurgeon's worst fears were realized because his own Baptist Church was now abandoning not only Calvinism but also orthodox theology. In his book, *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer wrote, "Could Spurgeon survey Protestant thinking about God at the present time, I guess he would speak of the nose dive, but his time was downgrading like a train moving slowly down a grade." It is interesting that Spurgeon's library is now in Missouri. It is at William Jewell College, a Baptist college in Independence near Kansas City. It was purchased in 1905 shortly after Charles Spurgeon died. The library consists of 6000 volumes. It is probably the best private, Puritan library in existence. The college in Kansas City purchased that library for 500 pounds in 1905. With the Spurgeon library in Kansas City and the tape collection in our library, we have in Missouri two fine Puritan collections.

I would like to end the lesson with a prayer from Spurgeon. Spurgeon is not only one of the great preachers of all times, but he is also perhaps the best preacher ever to know how to preach Reformed theology to people so that they could understand it, believe it, and put it into practice. Spurgeon got it right on almost everything. He was a Baptist, so I cannot endorse every single view of his, but he is one of my heroes as a preacher, as a theologian, and as a Christian man. Let us end our time with a prayer from Spurgeon.

*"Lord, educate us for a higher life and let that life be begun here. May we be always in the school, always disciples. And when we are out in the world may we try to put into practice what we have learned at Jesus' feet. What He tells us in darkness may we proclaim in the light. What He whispers in our ear in the closet may we sound forth upon the housetops. Amen."*

The question has been asked, “What was the Roman Catholic Church doing during this time?” They were aware of the Oxford Movement, and they tried their best to influence it. They saw the opportunity to establish the Roman Church much more strongly in England particularly if they could get an outstanding convert like Newman, and that is exactly what happened. Newman became a cardinal, and the Catholic Church used him, as it still does, to good advantage. Often Catholic student organizations at universities will be named for John Henry Newman because of his ability, wisdom, and writing. So, the Catholic Church, which was very marginal in England in the beginning of the nineteenth century, became a major force by the end of the century. Much of that was due to the Oxford Movement. The Oxford Movement split churches. Some stayed in the Church of England. Some, like John Mason Neal, were distressed that their colleagues were abandoning the church. Some people stayed in, but some went into the Roman Church. That was a major factor in the development of the Roman Church.

I am often asked, “What is the most influential group within the Church of England today? Despite the fact that most people in England today do not go to church (In fact, only a small number do. There is much lower church attendance there than in America), the Church of England still has more influence than any of the non-conformist groups. It is said sometimes that the Evangelical Party within the Church of England makes up about a third of the ministers of the Church of England. I do not think we can know for sure, but the evangelicals do have significant influence. However, they do not have as much influence as they like to think that they do or that we would like for them to have. The last several archbishops of Canterbury have had evangelical beginnings. Somehow, as people rise in the hierarchy of the Church of England, particularly to become archbishops, evangelical convictions tend to be flattened out a bit and more of the Broad Church is added to gain ascendancy in their own lives. I do not think the High Church is quite so influential anymore. People would just as soon become Roman Catholics if they were going to do that. So, it is still a rather Broad Church with an evangelical wing that is not unimportant. There is great determination on the part of evangelicals like John Stott to stay with it and see it through no matter what happens. Martin Lloyd-Jones, who was not a part of the Church of England but Congregational at Westminster Chapel, was very concerned that evangelicals would come out of the Church of England and establish a new evangelical fellowship. John Stott, Packer, and others opposed him on that, and nothing really came of it. By the way, there is a wonderful stained glass window of Charles Simeon at the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee near Chattanooga, which has an Episcopal chapel. So, even in an American college you can see a stained glass window dedicated to the memory of Simeon.

The question was asked, “Which is better: to hang together like Episcopalians or divide like Presbyterians?” I have thought about that quite a bit. The glue that holds the Episcopal Church together is the *Book of Common Prayer*. If you are saying the same prayers with everybody else, the same words, in the same way, at just about the same time, that tends to cement the church together. There is a lot of importance in that book. In *Real Christianity*, William Wilberforce said, “We do not hear the Gospel much anymore in our pulpits, but we hear it in our prayers.” So, as long as the prayers are being used, Wilberforce felt that there was something of the Gospel message coming through. You can see that in the funeral for Princess Diana at Westminster. There was a lot that was added to that that was not particularly Christian. But, when the prayer book was being used and the liturgy was being used it was powerful and amazing. I do not know how many people heard that or really paid any attention to it. Maybe it was just cultural words that English people say on an occasion like that. However, if you listened carefully, there was still a great deal of the Gospel there. So, by elevating the prayer book and pushing down the 39 Articles, Episcopalians can hang together. Presbyterians do not have a prayer book. We are all over the place as far as worship is concerned, so that does not unite us. But we like to be united on doctrine. The differences are felt more keenly perhaps because we are concerned for orthodoxy and doctrine. When there are differences, the attitude is to divide. Some Presbyterian

divisions have been essential and necessary. Others have not been. So, I would not say that every time Presbyterians divide that we are doing the right thing. We are often doing the wrong thing. Episcopalians, especially in this country, have all kinds of small movements now that are attempting to recreate a more traditional Episcopal Church in America. This is because the American Episcopal Church has departed so far from the 39 Articles and orthodox teaching. Soon there will be some significant movement in this area. Some of the bishops in some of the churches are quite orthodox—the bishop of Singapore, for instance, the archdiocese of Sydney, Australia, or perhaps the most evangelical diocese in the world. So, there are places in the world where the Anglican fellowship is much healthier than it is in America or in England. We might pray for revival in this church worldwide. Interestingly, if it comes it will probably not come from England or America but from Australia, Africa, Singapore, or somewhere else. We would be happy to see revival come from those areas.

I have been asked how Newman dealt with the Reformation doctrines. He was willing to abandon those for the Council of Trent. In fact, his *Tract 90* was the last of the tracts. It is a famous one because Newman tried his best to make the 39 Articles conform to medieval Catholicism. However, that produced an outcry in the church because that just could not be. This was a Calvinist, Protestant creed and not a medieval Catholic creed. The words were somewhat ambiguous at certain points. Newman attempted to force all of that over into the Catholic mold. I think he was quite happy to abandon that for Trent, which he felt was a more balanced and accurate theological statement.