



An analysis of the doctrine of the priesthood of Jesus Christ in the functional Christology of Charles Haddon Spurgeon

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Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the most popular preacher in the Victorian world,¹ has been studied, understood, and interpreted as a homiletician, pastor, evangelist, social worker, abolitionist, and college president.² While ‘we still await an adequate record and assessment of the man’,³ recent interest in his theological contribution has produced a need for Spurgeon to be analyzed critically for his theological merit. In this article, Spurgeon’s doctrine of the priesthood of Christ will be examined in light of his functional Christology,⁴ with additional attention given to Spurgeon’s reaction to the theological backdrop of nineteenth-century London.

For Spurgeon, the priestly office illuminates Christ’s work as mediator, sacrifice, intercessor, and advocate,⁵ and is buttressed by Old Testament types of Christ. For instance, a priest who received special anointing was but a shadow for Christ, who ‘hath received that which their oil did but set forth in type and shadow, he hath the real anointing from the Most High.’⁶ Spurgeon advances this thought in his sermon “The Tenderness of Jesus”, in which he expounds upon Christ’s anointing and his role as High Priest: ‘All that Israel had under the law we still retain; only we have the substance, of which they had only the shadow.’⁷ Jesus Christ, ‘who is the substance of the former shadows’,⁸ fulfilled the work of great High Priest in establishing communion between God and humanity. ‘He must mediate,’ writes Spurgeon, ‘and allow his mouth to be God’s mouth to the people.’⁹ In this way, Jesus followed ‘not after the order of the Aaronic priests, for they died, and there was an end of them so far as their priesthood was

concerned',¹⁰ but rather after a 'Melchisedec priesthood'¹¹ in which Christ rose from the dead. For Spurgeon, Christ's resurrection allowed him to be sacrificed, unlike those in the Old Testament; in having defeated death through death, Christ eradicates sacrifice altogether.

That Jesus Christ revealed the Father in such a way that his people could comprehend, induced Spurgeon to champion a Christology 'from above' in which humanity's understanding of God originated with God's self-disclosure to humanity in Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ.¹² Spurgeon preached, 'Some say that they will go from nature up to nature's God; they will do no such thing – the steps are much too steep for their feeble climbing.'¹³ In this economy of divine descent, a divine priest is needed to mediate between a holy God and unholy humanity.

Insomuch as 'a high priest took the other side also: *he was to communicate with God from men*',¹⁴ Spurgeon also recognizes the necessity of developing a Christology 'from below' in which Christ's humanity becomes the starting point for discussing his priestly duties:

He [Christ] must needs sit down and hear all the trembling petitions of troubled mothers who had come from the utmost end of Israel laden with their domestic burdens; he must listen to all the complaints of the oppressed, the woes of the afflicted, the trials of the poor, the perplexities of the distracted; and then, as a man of God, he was ordained to take all these things in prayer before the Most High.¹⁵

In doing so, Christ familiarized himself with humanity's plight; he hungers in accordance with its hunger, thirsts in accordance with its thirst, and suffers in all the ways that humanity possibly could suffer. Tom Nettles is correct in his description of Spurgeon's Christology, that he was 'a cataract, an avalanche, a flooding Mississippi in his unrelenting emphasis on the death by crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ.'¹⁶ For this reason, Spurgeon could also affirm the result of Christ's suffering in that he 'has finished his own work, and can therefore take our work into his hands, and bring it to perfection.'¹⁷

Yet in Spurgeon's ascending economy of mediation in which Christ expresses the concerns of humanity to the Father, a Priest who merely

suffered with humanity is not enough; indeed, the great High Priest must suffer *for* humanity, and by doing so provide humanity with a means of future escape from suffering altogether. The Christ who slays must be slain; the great High Priest must become the sacrificial lamb, whose blood, offered as a ransom for many, made satisfaction for sin. At this point in his Christology, Spurgeon underscores the teaching that Levitical priests must repeat the process of sacrifice to the end that a single sacrifice for the sins of the people could not suffice for a lifetime of trespasses.¹⁸ Yet Christ, in presenting himself as the ultimate sacrifice, in dying the death on a cross and rising from the dead in victory, made perfect atonement for the sins of his people once and for all. In doing so, not only were sacrifices rendered obsolete, but all earthly priests were also unnecessary.

Unlike Socinians who did not recognize Christ's priestly office,¹⁹ the Roman Catholics and Anglicans of nineteenth-century London produced their own priests in large quantities. Spurgeon allocated no small amount of ink to pointing out their theological blunders (for example, 'The up-going of priests is the dishonour of the High Priest Christ Jesus; but when priestcraft ceases to be, and is cast down, then the Lord alone is exalted in that day.')²⁰ For Spurgeon, the sacrifice for sin had already been offered; the path to reconciliation had already been paved. Any person who embraced the role of mediator was redundant, useless, and culpable of the severest of offences. 'A fine day is this', Spurgeon lamented, 'in which we are to go back to the superstitions of the dark ages – so dark that our forefathers could not bear them – and for the unsearchable cunning of priests are to give up the unsearchable riches of Christ!'²¹

Though in the final years of his ministry Spurgeon's sermons reveal an awakened ecumenism in which some of his earlier statements against non-Protestants have no place, it must be remembered that Spurgeon's upbringing in nonconformist Essex, along with his nonconformist heritage, had much to do with his attitudes against Roman Catholics. The Church of England, closely linked to the Catholic apostasy in Spurgeon's understanding, received its authority not from the Holy Spirit, but rather by the authority of the government. For him, this was the only explanation for the 'Popish mummeries' which survived the 'reformers' pruning knife.'²²

When at the height of his ministry in 1861 Spurgeon declared, ‘The curse of the State had engendered priestcraft, popedom – and what if I say hell-dom – in all lands’,²³ it must be acknowledged that he was aware of the second-generation Catholic presence in Southwark (the locus of his ministry), for instance in the area around Red Cross Street.²⁴ Also into the vicinity of Spurgeon’s Tabernacle came the Ritualists, who combined a Wesleyan ‘enthusiasm’ with high liturgical, ceremonial trappings.²⁵ Committed to spreading the gospel in slums like Southwark, which was full of public baths and ‘dirty little places’,²⁶ Ritualists flocked to Spurgeon’s neighbourhood, particularly during the cholera epidemic of 1849.²⁷

Sacramentalism and all its ‘popish evils’ advanced on all sides. ‘[W]e fight against doctrinal Popery,’ wrote Spurgeon, ‘not in Rome alone, but at Oxford too.’²⁸ Here he refers to the Oxford Movement,²⁹ founded in 1833 by John Henry Newman: Spurgeon believed that the Oxford intelligentsia, with their emphasis on restoring the spiritual principles of the Church of England,³⁰ had shortchanged the gospel of Jesus Christ by aligning themselves too closely with the deceitful practices of Catholicism. Only a boy when Tractarians like John Henry Newman and Edward Bouverie Pusey advanced their cause, Spurgeon could remember a time when a minister once declared, ‘Puseyism is a lie!’³¹ In those days, high churchmanship astonished the rural Essex population, but in 1880, when Anglican ritualism had come into vogue, Spurgeon announced, ‘Our parish churches are commonly turned into mass houses, and the Church of England is slightly to be distinguished in many parishes from the church of Rome, and yet nobody is astonished.’³²

To the end that Spurgeon sought to excoriate their beliefs and warn his congregation of the pitfalls of sacramentalistic movements, he declared:

How dare ye bring forward a virgin, blessed among women, and cause her very name to be defiled by styling her our intercessor before God? How dare ye bring your saints and saintesses and make these to mediate between God and men?³³

Spurgeon had little patience with those who ‘robbed’ Christ of his

priestly office, and many of his statements concerning Anglicanism and Catholicism, particularly in his early London years, reveal a biting vitriol. ‘Onward come the bands of priestcraft, cowed monks, and shaven priests,’³⁴ he said. ‘The “priest” preaches up himself, the extraordinary value of his ordination, the occult influences which flow from his touch, the mysterious power which dwells in baptismal water, and in “consecrated” wafers and poured-out wine.’³⁵ At best, ritualism, in all its manifestations, detracted from Christ’s priestly functions, and at worst, it replaced Christ entirely by fostering the religious superstition that had prevailed throughout the Dark Ages.

Spurgeon’s doctrine of Christ’s office as great High Priest further developed his belief in the dissolution of the Roman Catholic and Anglican clergy. ‘I like *scriptural* priestcraft; for that is the craft or work of the people who are all priests [...]. We are priests, each one of us, if we are called by divine grace’.³⁶ In this sense, Spurgeon does not mean that every Christian makes propitiation for sin, for that role only Christ could occupy; rather, inasmuch as Luther posited for the first time the priesthood of all believers in his *Sermon von der heiligen Messe* in 1520,³⁷ Spurgeon also declared, ‘You are all priests, because you love his dear name and have a great sacrifice to perform’.³⁸ Offering sacrifices of praise, adoration, and thanksgiving for what God had accomplished allowed each believer to share Christ’s priestly office to the end that they were united with him.³⁹ ‘If Luther had not affirmed it,’ Spurgeon added, ‘the doctrine would have been just as true, for the distinction between clergy and laity has no excuse in Scripture, which calls the saints, “God’s *kleros*” – God’s clergy or heritage.’⁴⁰

Spurgeon would have concurred with the Christology of the late T. F. Torrance in that only Jesus Christ can be ‘*pontifex* [Latin: ‘bridge-maker’] who is himself the *pons* [bridge].’⁴¹ Spurgeon, who often utilized mono-dialogue⁴² in his sermons, asks his congregation, ‘Will he throw himself into the chasm?’ He then answers it with, ‘He will. Into the grave he plunges, the abyss is closed! The gulf is bridged, and God can have communion with man!’⁴³ According to Spurgeon, Christ, who is the bridge, is also the bridge-maker. This can be seen in the following quote, taken from the sermon “The Ever-Living Priest.” In this sermon, Spurgeon expounds upon Hebrews 7:23–25 to

showcase Christ's atoning accomplishment in bridging the abyss that separated humanity from divinity:

Our Lord Jesus, being God and man in one person, reaches from side to side of the chasm. Coming near to us, this ladder stands at our foot in the human nature of our Lord, and it reaches right up to the infinite Majesty by reason of the divine nature of our Redeemer. God and man, in one person, unites God and man in one league of love.⁴⁴

Here, Spurgeon's functional Christology is marvelously condensed. Christ, who in his human nature identifies with humanity, and in his divine nature identifies with divinity, bridges the gap that separates the two from one another. No longer must a priest annually sacrifice for the sins of the people; the Lamb of God was 'offered upon the altar of Calvary for our sakes, that He might die as our Substitute and Representative.'⁴⁵

Spurgeon further unpacks Jesus Christ as priest not only by expounding on Christ's *endless life*⁴⁶ that fulfils *endless priesthood*,⁴⁷ but also by speaking to a Christ who not only makes *endless intercession*⁴⁸ through occupying the roles of High Priest, mediator, and sacrifice, but also intercedes for humanity in heaven. Spurgeon writes, 'His occupation in the skies is to plead for those sinners whom he redeemed with his blood, and hence he is able to save them unto the uttermost.'⁴⁹ Continually pleading, praying, and interceding on behalf of his people is Christ's persistent work of intercession.⁵⁰ For the ignorant and uneducated, for those who 'cannot put a dozen words together',⁵¹ Christ sits on his mercy-seat and offers their unpolished prayers to the Father.⁵² Not only does Christ usher their prayers, he also takes their praise,⁵³ which is also unsophisticated and elementary, and in this way intercedes not only for his people's tribulation, but also for their adulation. He is no 'amateur',⁵⁴ this priest who mediates; no 'slumbering'⁵⁵ intercessor who cannot accomplish his task. 'Beloved,' said Spurgeon, 'the Lord Jesus Christ is no petty, puny Saviour.'⁵⁶ Rather, the great High Priest who never falters, flounders, or fails,⁵⁷ pleads in 'midnight wrestlings for all his people',⁵⁸ unwaveringly entreating his Father on their behalf of the children that the Father had

given him.⁵⁹

It is interesting to recognize the benefactors of Christ's priestly intercessions. On the one hand, Spurgeon is resolved to believe that Christ intercedes on behalf of Christians: 'Our Lord Jesus himself pleads for the salvation and the prosperity of his chosen',⁶⁰ he preached. For those 'of old',⁶¹ whose names were written in the book of life before the foundation of the world, for 'all those whom the Father gave to him',⁶² Christ makes perfect and perpetual intercession.

Yet on the other hand, Spurgeon claimed that 'our great Intercessor pleads for such as never asked him to plead for them',⁶³ for 'guilty men'⁶⁴ who are dead in their sins, unregenerate, and rebellious against God. Even while they 'scoff at His gospel, His heart of love is entreating the favour of heaven on their behalf.'⁶⁵ Without a robust adherence to the doctrine of irresistible grace, which ensures that Christ will save all those whom the Father draws, articulated by Calvin in his commentary on John 6:44,⁶⁶ Spurgeon would be forced to say that Christ interceded for the sins of those who would never find atonement, whose pursuit of sin was not overcome by the intervening agenda of God, and who would eventually reap the eternal punishment of their rebellion against God by forever being separated from his presence. This, of course, was unacceptable. Christ's intercessions could not be uttered in vain.

It is important to note that Spurgeon can never be accused of universalism, in which everyone finds salvation in the irresistible grace of God.⁶⁷ His evangelistic efforts were fuelled by his belief in a real hell into which sinners fall by the hour.⁶⁸ Yet inasmuch as God is capable of wooing and winning a people, inasmuch as he is able to draw a flock unto himself, Spurgeon can believe that Christ makes full intercession for his elect before, during, and after their acceptance of God's redeeming gift of grace. In this way, the Intercessor can say, "'Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word.'"'⁶⁹

Spurgeon concludes his doctrine of Christ's priestly offices, as in the case of all his other doctrines, in application. True understanding of Christ's priestly work occurred not in the classroom, but rather in the hearts of believers. 'We have learned Christ's priesthood', he writes, 'not only out of the book, but because the blood of his atonement

has been sprinkled upon us.⁷⁰ A knowledge of Christ that is void of personal experience resulted in useless, abstract theological pursuits, the kind of which Tractarians were often accused.⁷¹ Yet for Spurgeon, true Christianity involved ‘personally living with a personal Saviour, personally trusting a personal Redeemer, personally crying out to a personal Intercessor’.⁷² In this way, Spurgeon’s functional Christology must be seen as auxiliary to his ontological Christology in that Christ’s work for humanity is properly realized in the reality of Christ’s human nature. For it is only through the person of Jesus Christ that a personal relationship with the Father is possible.

Notes

- 1 See William Mathews, *Hours With Men and Books* (Chicago: S. C. Griggs and Company, 1877), 81, 89.
- 2 G. Holden Pike, *Charles Haddon Spurgeon: Preacher, Author, Philanthropist* (London; New York; Toronto: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1892), 257. See also H. Tydeman Chilvers quoted in Eric W. Hayden, *Highlights in the Life of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Rio, Wis.: AGES Library, 2006), 91.
- 3 W. Charles Johnson, *Encounter in London: The Story of the London Baptist Association, 1865–1965* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1965), 18. Lewis Drummond’s *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1992) comes close in meeting the qualifications for being a definitive biography, but his work suffers from several unchecked sources and odd changes in voice and tone, and therefore cannot be an historically reliable source.
- 4 I use the word ‘functional’ in distinction to Spurgeon’s ontological Christology.
- 5 Spurgeon notes that the definition of *cohen*, priest, ‘is from *cahan*, to plead a cause, as an intercessor, mediator, or advocate’. Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of David: Containing an Original Exposition of the Book of Psalms; a Collection of Illustrative Extracts from*

- the Whole Range of Literature; a Series of Homiletical Hints Upon Almost Every Verse; and Lists of Writers Upon Each Psalm* (originally published: London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1887; reprint: Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1983), IV:393; hereafter cited as *Treasury of David*.
- 6 Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised by C. H. Spurgeon* (63 vols.; Pasadena: Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1970, 1976, 1984), XV:6; hereafter cited as *MTP* or in other editions.
- 7 *MTP*, XXXVI:313.
- 8 *MTP*, X:438.
- 9 *MTP*, XXXVI:315.
- 10 *MTP*, XLVII:52.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 See Roger Haight, *The Future of Christology* (New York; London: Continuum, 2005), 52.
- 13 *MTP*, XXXVI:315 f.
- 14 Ibid., 316, italics original.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Tom Nettles, “Spurgeon’s Message of Christ’s Atoning Sacrifice, Part 1”, *The Founders Journal*, Issue 14, Fall 1993, [unnumbered]. Online: <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/journal/fj14/article1.html>, accessed 1 November 2010.
- 17 *MTP*, LVII:618.
- 18 *MTP*, XXXVIII:563.
- 19 See John Jamieson, *Socinianism Unmasked: In Four Letters to the Lay-Members of the Church of Scotland, and Especially to Those of the Collegiate Church of Ayr: Occasioned by Dr. M’Gill’s Practical Essay on the Death of Jesus Christ. Proving, That He Denies the Great Doctrines of the Atonement, of the Deity of our Lord, &c. &c. To Which Are Added, A Letter to the Doctor, and an Humble Address to the Members of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. By A Friend To Truth. Second Edition, Corrected and Enlarged: With Reflections on the Influence of the Socinian Doctrine on Holiness of Life* (Edinburgh: printed for W. Laing et al., 1790), letter III, 73.
- 20 *MTP* (Rio, Wis.: AGES Library, 2006), VII:401. Hereafter cited

- as *MTP* (AGES).
- 21 *MTP*, XIII:210.
- 22 Charles Spurgeon, *The Sword and the Trowel* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1975–), II (1869):207. Hereafter cited as *ST*.
- 23 *MTP* (AGES), VII:1111.
- 24 S. C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c. 1880–1939* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 140.
- 25 Desmond Bowen, *The Idea of the Victorian Church: A Study of the Church of England, 1833–1889* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1968), 285.
- 26 Charles Booth, quoted in Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark*, 47, footnote 135.
- 27 Bowen, *The Idea of the Victorian Church*, 289.
- 28 *ST*, II (1868), preface.
- 29 The Oxford Movement originated on 14 July 1833. John Keble of Oriel College preached a sermon concerning “National Apostasy” which fell on the ears of John Henry Newman, who later published a tract entitled, “Thoughts on the Ministerial Commission, Respectfully Addressed to the Clergy” which provided a name to their movement – the Tractarians. Tractarians believed in the sovereignty of the church and its independence from the state. Following Keble’s address, the movement quickly gained in popularity among the Oxford dons. Bowen, *The Idea of the Victorian Church*, 42, 51.
- 30 Bowen, *The Idea of the Victorian Church*, 45.
- 31 *MTP*, XXVI:186.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 387.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 174.
- 34 *MTP*, XXII:539.
- 35 *MTP*, LV:538.
- 36 *MTP*, I:75, italics original.
- 37 Martin Luther, *Sermon von dem neuen Testament, das ist von der heiligen Messe*. See Julius Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther In Its Historical Development and Inner Harmony* (trans. from the 2nd German ed. by Charles E. Hay; Philadelphia, Pa.: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), 361.

- 38 *MTP*, I:75.
- 39 Zdeněk David adds that according to Luther's doctrine of Christ as Priest, the bestowment of priesthood to all believers occurs in the union, or 'mystical marriage' between groom and bridegroom, i.e., between Christ and his people. Zdeněk V. David, "Utraquism's Curious Welcome to Luther and the Candlemas Day Articles of 1524" in *The Slavonic and East European Review* 79 (2001):67.
- 40 *MTP*, XXIX:625.
- 41 T. F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 190.
- 42 By this it is meant that Spurgeon dialogues with himself from the pulpit with questions and answers. This was a common homiletic strategy in his sermons, for it allowed him to anticipate the questions of his congregation and then answer them.
- 43 *MTP*, IX:195.
- 44 *MTP*, XXXII:446.
- 45 *MTP*, XLV:594.
- 46 *MTP*, XXXII:447, italics original.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 449, italics original.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 451, italics original.
- 49 *MTP*, XIV:260.
- 50 Charles Spurgeon, *Morning & Evening: Daily Readings by C. H. Spurgeon* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1994; reprinted 2000), December 19, Morning. Hereafter cited as *Morning & Evening*.
- 51 *MTP*, XVI:512.
- 52 *MTP*, XV:274.
- 53 *MTP*, X:518.
- 54 *MTP*, XXXVI:580.
- 55 *MTP*, XV:594.
- 56 *MTP*, XXXIII:93.
- 57 *Morning & Evening*, June 4, Evening.
- 58 *MTP*, XIV:269.
- 59 *MTP*, XLVII:307.
- 60 *Treasury of David*, V:332.
- 61 *Ibid.*

- 62 *MTP*, XXXVI:265.
- 63 *MTP*, XV:592.
- 64 *Ibid.*
- 65 *Ibid.*, 593.
- 66 ‘*Unless the Father draw him. To come to Christ* being here used metaphorically for *believing*, the Evangelist, in order to carry out the metaphor in the apposite clause, says that those persons are *drawn* whose understandings God enlightens, and whose hearts he bends and forms to the obedience of Christ. The statement amounts to this, that we ought not to wonder if many refuse to embrace the Gospel; because no man will ever of himself be able to come to Christ, but God must first approach him by his Spirit; and hence it follows that all are not *drawn*, but that God bestows this grace on those whom he has elected. True, indeed, as to the kind of *drawing*, it is not violent, so as to compel men by external force; but still it is a powerful impulse of the Holy Spirit, which makes men willing who formerly were unwilling and reluctant. It is a false and profane assertion, therefore, that none are *drawn* but those who are willing to be *drawn*, as if man made himself obedient to God by his own efforts; for the willingness with which men follow God is what they already have from himself, who has formed their hearts to obey him.’ John Calvin, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1 (trans. W. Pringle; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 168, italics original. Online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom34.html>, accessed 29 October 2010.
- 67 Charles Spurgeon, *The Down Grade Controversy*, (Rio, Wis.: AGES Library, 2006), 39.
- 68 *MTP* (AGES), VIII:3.
- 69 *MTP*, X:102.
- 70 *MTP*, XLVII:137, cf. John 17:20.
- 71 Bowen, *The Idea of the Victorian Church*, 151.
- 72 *MTP*, XLVII:136.