

CHARLES SIMEON

1759-1836

Charles Simeon was born on September 24, 1759. Up until college, his life was relatively undistinguished: He went to Eton for prep. school and from there to King's College at Cambridge in 1779. Although baptized when he was a month old, Simeon was not particularly religious. However, both Cambridge and Oxford had mandatory chapel at this time, and three days after his arrival on campus in January, Simeon was informed he would be expected to receive Communion three weeks later.

Although all Cambridge students were required to receive communion at least three times in order to graduate, few took the requirement seriously. Simeon was different. After learning of his upcoming participation in this rite, Simeon wrote in his diary that "Satan himself was as fit to attend as I; and that if I must attend, [to receive Holy Communion] I must prepare for my attendance there. Without a moment's loss of time, I bought the old Whole Duty of Man, (the only religious book that I had ever heard of) and began to read it with great diligence; at the same time calling my ways to remembrance, and crying to God for mercy; and so earnest was I in these exercises, that within the three weeks I made myself quite ill with reading, fasting, and prayer..."



Although Simeon made his January Communion, he continued to feel like he was unfit for the Lord's Table. To fix this, Simeon took a quintessentially studious approach: He acquired a number of books, mostly dry theological treatises, to try and understand the meaning of Communion.

He also went around trying to undo all his former sins, but wrote that he was "so greatly oppressed with the weight of them, that I frequently looked upon the dogs with envy." He found he had so many sins, that he despaired of ever fully making restitution for them.

During Holy Week, Simeon was reading "Bishop Wilson's" book, which was speaking of the Jewish sacrifices in the Old Testament, and how the participants would transfer their sin to the head (scapegoat?) of their offering. Simeon had an epiphany: "What! may I transfer all my guilt to another? From that moment on I sought to lay my sins on the sacred head of Jesus, and on the Wednesday began to have a hope of mercy; and on the Thursday that hope increased; and on Friday and Saturday it became more strong; and on the Sunday (Easter Day, April 4) I awoke early with those words upon my heart and lips, 'Jesus Christ is risen to-day; Hallelujah! Hallelujah! From that hour peace flowed in rich abundance into my soul; and at the Lord's Table in our chapel I had the sweetest access to God through my blessed Saviour.'"

The 1770s were not an auspicious time to be an evangelical Christian. The Anglican Church was in the midst of dealing with the new Methodist movement and the universities were strongholds of the established Church of England. A few years before Simeon's arrival at Cambridge, a group of students at Oxford had met on Sunday evenings for extemporaneous prayer and mutual

encouragement. When a professor complained of “certain Enthusiasts in that Society, who talked of regeneration, inspiration, and drawing nigh unto God,” the students were expelled.

Simeon recalls in his memoirs that after his conversion as a freshman, “for three years I knew not any religious person.” He went through all of college alone without any other Christian students for support. Despite these obstacles, Simeon kept his faith and was ordained shortly after graduation by the Bishop of Peterborough.

In 1782, the bishop appointed Simeon as curate-in-charge at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge, near the University. This was not a welcome event to the congregation: like most church congregations at the time, they wanted a preacher who would entertain, instead of one who issued serious exhortations to repent and believe, as Simeon did.

Church at this time was a little different than today: The job of priest/curate/rector was often a patronage position, given as a political or social favor, and the churchwardens or vestry really controlled the church. Another important difference was that the pew seats were assigned, and had doors on the ends which could be locked, to prevent anyone else from sitting in them. While the Holy Trinity churchwardens could not prevent Simeon from officiating at the Sunday morning service, for years the congregation not only refused to listen to Simeon’s sermons, but locked their pews so that any visitors would not have a place to sit. When Simeon rented chairs at his own expense and placed them in the aisles, the churchwardens threw them out. One faculty member deliberately scheduled Sunday Greek sessions so his students would not have an opportunity to hear Simeon preach. Students hurled bricks through windows in on his worship services and lectures. Simeon remarked one day in his journal that he had been amazed that some student was not ashamed to walk with him around the Clare College quad for a mere fifteen minutes.



But he persevered and won over many who held him in contempt through his integrity and steadfast clutch on the gospel, although he would face opposition until the very end of his life and ministry.

Simeon had carved on the inside of the church pulpit, where only the preacher could see, the words a group of Greeks spoke to Philip when he and the other disciples were with Christ in Jerusalem before His death: “Sir, we would see Jesus” (John 12:21). Although constantly wondering if he should leave, Simeon remained at Holy Trinity for more than fifty years.

Simeon’s concern did not stop with his own congregation. On Sunday evenings he held classes in constructing good sermons, helping Cambridge students who would later become pastors. The students who caught Simeon’s vision for evangelical witness became known as “Simeonites,” or “Sims.” In later years, Simeon began collecting and publishing his sermon outlines as *Horae Homileticae*.

Simeon realized that, while there was no shortage of solid Evangelical priests, the patronage system of parish appointments not only made it difficult for Evangelicals to secure parish appointments, but meant that continuity was not guaranteed: A congregation with a good preacher that left would not necessarily receive a good replacement. To combat these problems Charles Simeon established a trust, later known as the Simeon's Trust, to purchase the "livings" or "advowsons" — the right to appoint the priest-in-charge — of various parishes.

In 1827 William Leeke, a fervent "Sim," and a number of other Cambridge students (from Queens' College) decided to set up a Sunday school for children living near Jesus Lane and which eventually moved to the Barnwell. 220 children showed up for the first session of the Jesus Lane Sunday School.

Simeon died on November 12, 1836. By this time he didn't have to worry about people being ashamed to be seen with him--over half the University came to pay their last respects to the great preacher. Nor did Simeon's ministries end at his death. The Simeon's Trust continues to work for evangelical leadership and quality preaching: St Peter's in Colchester is a present-day example of a Simeon's Trust parish.

*This short biographical sketch was written by John Kimbrough, a dear friend of the Charles Simeon Trust, while serving as a Research Librarian at the University of Chicago.

