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WHAT CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON'S SERMON ON THE CHOLERA EPIDEMIC CAN TEACH US ABOUT MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CHARACTERIZATION IN PREACHING

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The recent coronavirus pandemic is not unprecedented. Throughout history, the world has had been acquainted with many similar catastrophes.¹ Starting in the 1830s, London, a city of more than two million people, was struck with the outbreak of cholera.² Though scholars are not entirely certain who the first victim of cholera in Britain was, Amanda Thomas argues that it was a twelve-year-old girl by the name of Isabella Hazard (of Sunderland) who passed away in October of 1831.³ Initially, doctors were not familiar with the symptoms and prognosis for cholera. They had no idea how the disease spread and there was no cure.

Nevertheless, the impact of the catastrophe rippled across the city. According to the *London Medical Gazette*, by 18 June 1831, the epidemic was already on people's minds. 'No medical man can enter a house with-

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¹ Sonia Shah, *From Cholera to Ebola and Beyond* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2016).

² On the issue of the outbreak of cholera in Victorian England, see James Alderson, *A Brief Outline of the History and Progress of Cholera at Hull* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, 1932);

Thomas Shapter, *The History of the Cholera in Exeter in 1932* (London: S. R. Publishers, 1978); Margaret Pelling, *Cholera, Fever and English Medicine, 1825-1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Dorothy Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times* (London: Routledge, 1999); John G. Avery, *The Cholera Years: An Account of the Cholera Outbreaks in Our Ports, Towns, and Villages* (Southampton: Beech Books, 2001); Amanda J. Thomas, *The Lambeth Cholera Outbreak of 1848-1849: The Setting, Causes, Course and Aftermath of an Epidemic in London* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2009).

³ Amanda J. Thomas, *Cholera: The Victorian Plague* (Croydon, UK: Pen and Sword History, 2015), p. 38.

out being questioned about it; and the papers, both at home and abroad, teem with the most alarming accounts. In short, there is complete panic'.⁴ On Saturday, 12 November 1831, *The Times* reported the first group of causalities.⁵ The outbreak would go on to wreak havoc on London, killing over fourteen thousand people.⁶

With cholera taking away the lives of many, renowned Victorian preacher and pastor Charles Haddon Spurgeon did not lock himself up in his ivory tower nor did he escape to a quarantined area. Rather, his priority was to be with his people. He testifies, 'During that epidemic of cholera, though I had many engagements in the country, I gave them up that I might remain in London to visit the sick and the dying'.⁷ This has led *The Examiner* to call Spurgeon 'an evangelizing philanthropist' and 'a man... whose name was "Help"'.⁸

In the midst of such a catastrophe, how did Spurgeon minister to his people through preaching? Though the esteemed preacher had often referenced the outbreak in the applications of his sermons, he had only delivered one sermon that was exclusively focused on the cholera epidemic. Delivered on August 12, 1866 at London's Metropolitan Tabernacle when Spurgeon was 32 years-old, the sermon 'The Voice of the Cholera', was based upon Amos 3:3-6.⁹ In this passage, the prophet Amos brings a charge against the city of Jerusalem who has broken covenant with Yahweh.¹⁰ Through the use rhetorical questions, Amos tries to show his audience how their relationship with God has been fragmented and that God's judgment is imminent.

⁴ *The London Medical Gazette*, 18 June 1831.

⁵ *The Times*, 12 November 1831.

⁶ William Luckin, 'The Final Catastrophe: Cholera in London, 1866', *Medical History* 21 (1977): 32-42.

⁷ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, C. H. *Autobiography Volume 1: The Early Years 1834-1859, A Revised Edition, Originally Compiled by Susannah Spurgeon and Joseph Harrod* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), p. 273. On Spurgeon and his care for social issues, see Christian T. George, *The Lost Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon Volume I: His Earliest Outlines and Sermons Between 1851 and 1854* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016), xx.

⁸ *The Examiner*, July 10, 1884.

⁹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 'The Voice of Cholera', *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 12 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1866), pp. 448-62.

¹⁰ Jonathan Ben-Dov, 'Justice and the City: A Reading of Amos 3:9-15', *Vetus Testamentum* 67 (2017): 528-45.

Thomas Breimaier notes that for this sermon, Spurgeon breaks from his usual habit of preaching from several verses rather than just one.¹¹ In the sermon, Spurgeon argues that the cholera epidemic was sent by God as a wake-up call for the city of London to repent. Specifically, identifying the issues of drunkenness and the breaking of the Christian Sabbath, Spurgeon believed that London's sinful behaviours warrant God's 'national chastisement'.¹²

In this article, we want to examine how Spurgeon engages with his listeners through the creation of multi-dimensional characters within his sermons. To accomplish such an aim, we will be offering a close reading of the Victorian preacher's sermon, 'The Voice of Cholera'. Central to Spurgeon's rhetoric is his creation of four multi-dimensional characters within the sermon. Through these characters, Spurgeon addressed the epidemic and what the city's response towards it should be. We will proceed in four steps. First, we will briefly outline the content and theology of the sermon. Second, four of these characters within the sermon will be examined. Third, attention will be paid to the role of the gospel and the development of these characters. Finally, we will conclude by drawing out some practical applications for preaching today.

1. THE CONTENT AND THEOLOGY OF SPURGEON'S SERMON

Spurgeon begins his sermon by acknowledging the tragic crisis in London. He then proceeds to thank the medical and scientific professionals who are working to contain the outbreak, saying, 'I am thankful that there are many men of intelligence and scientific information who can speak well upon this point, and I hope that they never cease to speak'.¹³ He further notes that 'the gospel has no quarrel with ventilation, and the doctrines of grace have no dispute with chloride of lime. We preach repentance and faith, but we do not denounce whitewash...'.¹⁴

After his preamble, he offers some theological reflections on the cholera epidemic. He starts off by clarifying his belief that not every affliction is the result of sin.¹⁵ He cautions, 'among those, as you know, who believe

¹¹ Thomas Breimaier, *Tethered to the Cross: The Life and Preaching of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020), p. 116.

¹² Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 450.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

¹⁴ Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 446.

¹⁵ On Spurgeon's view of God's purposes in suffering, see Michael Reeves, *Spurgeon on the Christian Life: Alive in Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), pp. 163-74; John Piper, *Charles Spurgeon: Preaching Through Adversity* (Minneapolis: Desiring God, 2015); Peter J. Morden, *Communion with Christ and*

that every affliction is a judgment upon the particular person to whom it occurs. We perceive that in this world the best of men often endure the most of suffering, and that the worst of men frequently escape'.¹⁶

Though not all sufferings are to be equated with sinful rebellions, Spurgeon also believes that God sometimes uses events, such as the cholera, as a wake-up call for a city to repent. Specifically, mentioning the issues of drunkenness and the breaking of the Christian Sabbath, Spurgeon holds that London's sinful behaviours warrant God's judgment.¹⁷ However, the sermon is not all about gloom. Characteristic of Spurgeon's penchant to exalt the cross of Jesus,¹⁸ Spurgeon continues: 'Can you bear to be at disagreement with God [...] you ask his protection, but how can you expect it if you are not agreed with him? Now, if two men walk together, there must be a place where they meet each other. Do you know where that is? It is at the cross. Sinner, if thou trusteth in Jesus, God will meet thee there'.¹⁹

Therefore, if the sermon's 'big idea'²⁰ is that 'God uses the cholera epidemic as a sign in calling Londoners to repentance', how does Spurgeon draw out this homiletical thrust? We want to argue that Spurgeon brings his 'big idea' across through the presentation of four multi-dimensional characters in the sermon, which is what we will look at next.

2. SPURGEON AND THE USE OF MULTI-DIMENSIONAL CHARACTERIZATION IN PREACHING

In his seminal *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster is one of the earliest scholars to make a distinction between flat and round or multi-dimensional characters in a narrative.²¹ On one hand, flat characters, as Forster puts it, are 'constructed around a single idea or quality'.²² Their behaviours are stereotypical and predictable. Their purpose is usually didactic: such as, they foreground a human vice or virtue. Jacques Souvage and Dennis Bromley further maintain that a flat character is not fully described in

His People: The Spirituality of C. H. Spurgeon (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), pp. 259-85; Zach Eswine, *Spurgeon's Sorrows: Realistic Hope for Those Who Suffer from Depression* (London: Christian Focus, 2015).

¹⁶ Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 446.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

¹⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: Complete and Unabridged* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), p. 395.

¹⁹ Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 459.

²⁰ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), pp. 15-26.

²¹ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Mariner Books, 1927), p. 68.

²² *Ibid.*

the text and we should not expect a flat character to show an array of emotions.²³

On the other hand, a round character is multi-dimensional: he or she is complex, capable of change and development.²⁴ According to Forster, the test of a round character is that he or she is able to surprise in a convincing way. Adding to the discussion, E. M. Lekganyane and M. J. Mojlefa believe that a multi-dimensional character is able to express a variety of emotions; he or she is able to reflect 'real life-like complexity of human existence'.²⁵ Renaming Forster's 'round character' as a 'full-fledged character', Adele Berlin believes that such a character is

realistically portrayed; their emotions and motivations are either made explicit or are left to be discerned by the reader from hints provided in the narrative. We feel that we know them, understand them, and can, to a large extent, identify with them.²⁶

In the sermon 'The Voice of Cholera', Spurgeon creates four such characters.

2.1. *The Intoxicated City*

Instead of charging at his parishioners with accusatory indictments about their failings, Spurgeon invites his congregants to take a tour of London with him as his fellow travellers. This tour is congruous with Spurgeon's text, where Amos invites his readers to embark on a tour of Jerusalem with God. Functioning as the tour guide, Spurgeon highlights the areas in the city which have lapsing in morality as he commences this city-wide tour. In so doing, Spurgeon has rhetorically created a space between his hearers and their environments. This space will allow his congregants to see the city's failings with greater perspicuity and objectivity.

In Spurgeon's rhetoric, the city comes alive with a multi-dimensional realism. Anticipating the advice of C. S. Lewis 'not to use adjectives which

²³ Jacques Souvage, *An Introduction to the Study of the Novel* (New York: Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1965), p. 38; Dennis B. Bromley, *Personality Description in Ordinary Language* (London: Basil Wiley, 1977), p. 24.

²⁴ Kristin Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), p. 16.

²⁵ E. M. Lekganyane and M. J. Mojlefa, 'Flat and Round Characters in Northern Sotho Literary Texts', in *Rabadia Ratshatsha: Studies in African Language Literature, Linguistics, Translation and Lexicography*, ed. by Mawatle Jerry Mojalefa (Stellenbosch: Sun, 2007), pp. 105-14, here p. 105.

²⁶ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretations of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), pp. 31-32.

merely tell us how you want us to feel about the thing you are describing',²⁷ Spurgeon uses vivid descriptions to paint a three-dimensional London where one can see its sights, smell its filth, and experience the brawl at the local tavern. If Charles Dickens' description of London in his book *Oliver Twist* is prided for the attention paid to its details,²⁸ Spurgeon's depiction trails not far behind. Within the space of the sermon, Spurgeon's tour visits a gin palace,²⁹ London's gilded chambers,³⁰ musical taverns,³¹ a few churches,³² the royal palace,³³ and even a bakery.³⁴ In his first stop, Spurgeon brings us to a tavern. With language that appeals to sight, sound and touch, Spurgeon allows us experience what it is like to be surrounded by debauchery at a local tavern.³⁵ He describes:

the gin palace blazes with glaring lights at every corner, and the gates through which drunkards reel to Hell are open at every turn — it may be so; but I must still hold that there is no other country where drunkenness is carried on to such an extent under so strong a protest, for drunkenness happens to be a sin against which not only the pulpit, the press, and the bench are continually exclaiming, but tens of thousands of earnest, indefatigable, courageous, self-denying men, and women are both by their example and their teaching, denouncing this vice.³⁶

According to Spurgeon, the sin of drunkenness is rampant not only in the taverns, but also across the entire city, affecting both women and men. Riots and unrest are everywhere:

Shall not God visit London for the sins which nightly pollute her streets, fester in gilded halls, and riots amid revelry and music? Like a terrible monster, the social evil drags our daughters down to destruction, and our young men to the gates of the grave, and while this lasts, we need not wonder if God's

²⁷ Clive Staples Lewis, *C. S. Lewis Letters to Children*, ed. by Lyle W. Dorsett and Marjorie L. Mead (New York: Touchstone, 1985), p. 64.

²⁸ Andrea Warren, *Charles Dickens and the Street Children of London* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2011), pp. 104-14.

²⁹ Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 450.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 458.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 453.

³⁵ The appeal to the senses is one of Spurgeon's rhetorical forte, see Jay E. Adams, *Sense Appeal in the Sermons of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975).

³⁶ Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 450.

health-giving Providence should refuse to walk with us, for He cannot be agreed with a people who choose the way of filthiness.³⁷

With sin being described in concrete terms in tandem with the city's landscape, God's judgment is similarly expressed. If the people choose to be unrepentant, God will lay 'the axe at the root of all sin' and he will through the power of the gospel and those who herald it saw off 'this particular limb from the great tree of evil'.³⁸

However, London is not only visually depicted with a multi-dimensional realism, Spurgeon also helps us to 'smell' the city's odour. Throughout the sermon, he also uses words such as 'stench', 'filthiness', and 'filth' to describe the sins of the Londoners. He even refers to God as one 'in whose nostrils fornication is a stench'.³⁹ Spurgeon's reference to smell is particularly poignant during the outbreak of the cholera epidemic.

Prior to the discoveries of London-based physician John Snow,⁴⁰ the prevailing thought was that the inhalation of miasma or unpleasant smell caused the transmission of cholera;⁴¹ the biggest culprit being the smell of the River Thames. Published in 1842, Edwin Chadwick in his report argued that unless there was a better drainage system, the noxious smells would lead to 'acute disease; and eventually we may say that, by depressing the system and rendering it susceptible to the action of other causes, all smell is disease'.⁴² Victorian scientist Michael Faraday in a letter to *The Times* shocked many Londoners and the state of the River Thames when he dropped a white piece of paper to 'test the degree of opacity'.⁴³ His conclusion was that 'the whole river was for the time a real sewer'.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the question arises: Of all the social and moral misdemeanours plaguing London, why does Spurgeon single out alcohol abuse? In 1831, *The Times* reported that a 17-year-old girl suffering from cholera was cured by a naval surgeon.⁴⁵ She recovered after she was given a wine glass of brandy and water, followed by 30 drops of laudanum, a pint of

³⁷ Ibid., p. 451.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ For more on John Snow, see Sandra Hempel, *The Medical Detective: John Snow, Cholera and the Mystery of the Broad Street Pump* (London: Granta, 2007).

⁴¹ Thomas, *Cholera: The Victorian Plague*, p. 20.

⁴² Edwin Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965).

⁴³ *The Times*, 9 July 1855.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 16 November 1831.

hot gruel, and a tablespoon of salt. Less than two weeks later, *The Times* again reported how two seamen on board the naval vessel *HMS Revenge* had recovered from cholera after they drank brandy.⁴⁶ As a result, many Victorians believed that brandy was the cure to cholera.⁴⁷

However, this view was later challenged by the medical community.⁴⁸ Not only did brandy fail to keep the infection numbers down, but it had also given rise to drunkenness and violence.⁴⁹ Representing the medical community, John Snow, a pioneer anaesthetist, writes:

The brandy treatment has been extensively tried in cholera, but it is now abandoned in all parts of the world. If the debility is not so great that life is not destroyed by it (brandy), still it hurries on and makes more violent that reaction, that secondary fever which is most to be dreaded, and increases the tendency which there is to inflammation in the head and elsewhere.⁵⁰

2.2. *The Muted Church*

If the city of London is depicted as a drunkard, the church is seen as a mute. In his virtual tour around the city, Spurgeon stops at various 'places of worship' during 'the hour of public worship'.⁵¹ He observes how empty some of churches are:

In some of our country towns and villages the accommodation in places of worship is even larger than the population, and I know places in England where there is scarcely a soul to be found at home at the hour of public worship — certainly not more than absolutely necessary to nurse the sick, care for the infants, and protect the doors, for the whole population turns out to attend a place of worship. But in London the habitual forsakers of public worship are probably in a large majority.⁵²

In contrast to the past, Spurgeon observes how the churches are not only empty, but the churches have also lost their 'voice'. Where once the 'voice

⁴⁶ *The Times*, 5 December 1831.

⁴⁷ Robert J. Morris, *Cholera 1832: The Social Response to an Epidemic* (London: Croon Helm 1976).

⁴⁸ James Johnson, *The Medico-Chirurgical Review and Journal of Practical Medicine Vol. 20* (S. Highley, 1832), p. 283.

⁴⁹ Thomas Shapter, *The History of the Cholera in Exeter in 1832* (Wakefield and London: S. R. Publishers, 1971), p. 78.

⁵⁰ Thomas Snow, 'A Doctor's Teetotal Address Delivered in 1836', *British Temperance Advocate* (November 1888), pp. 20-21.

⁵¹ Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 451.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 451-2.

of the Gospel' resounded across London, now it is 'despised'.⁵³ Churches are no longer 'protesting' against the ways of the world. Conversely, they now singing in harmony with the chorus of the world. Spurgeon indicts, 'We have no longer any right to speak of our national Protestant Church; it is not Protestant, it tolerates barefaced Popery, and swarms with worshippers of the god whom the baker bakes in the oven, and whom they bite with their teeth'.⁵⁴

In order to heighten volume of the church's former testimony, Spurgeon lists the contributions of former saints, such as Hugh Latimer, John Knox, John Welch, and John Bradford. In contrast to the glowing testimonies of the past, the church is now reduced to a feeble murmur. 'In days of yore, men like Knox, and Welch in Scotland, and Hugh Latimer, and John Bradford, fought like lions for the Truth of God, and are we to yield like cowardly curs? Are the men of oak succeeded by the men of willow'?⁵⁵ He continues, 'Shall you forever turn your foot from God's House and despise the ministrations of His Truth, and shall He not visit such a city as this'?⁵⁶

Spurgeon's censure against the church is not baseless. The Oxford movement, which started in 1830s, had been criticized for their tendencies to 'Romanise' the church.⁵⁷ This is why the movement is later known as Anglo-Catholicism. It started with a group of devotees at the University of Oxford argued for the reinstating of some older Christian traditions of faith and their inclusion into Anglican liturgy and theology. Sometimes the principles of the movement were also known as Tractarianism, which was named after its series of publications, the *Tracts for the Times*, which were published between 1833 to 1941. Spurgeon is militantly vocal in his opposition against the Oxford movement in this sermon. Referring to Tractarianism as 'Papistical heresies',⁵⁸ Spurgeon believes that such teachings should be eradicated:

⁵³ Ibid., p. 452.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 453.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 452.

⁵⁷ For more on the Oxford movement, see George Herring, *What Was the Oxford Movement?* (London: Continuum, 2002); Geoffrey Rowell, *The Vision Glorious: Themes and Personalities of the Catholic Revival in Anglicanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); David Newsome, *The Parting of Friends: A Study of the Wilberforces and Henry Manning* (London: John Murray, 1966); Peter Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship 1760-1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 453.

If the Church of England does not sweep Tractarianism out of her midst, it should be the daily prayer of every Christian that God would sweep her utterly away from this nation; for the old leprosy of Rome ought not to be sanctioned and supported by a land which has shed so much of her blood to be purged from it!⁵⁹

Was Spurgeon fair in his criticism of the Oxford movement? Spurgeon certainly was not the only evangelical to express concern over the movement's Roman Catholic tendencies. Leading evangelical scholar of the mid-Victorian era, John Harrison had written about how one of Tractarian's leaders Edward Pusey had been incorporating the Roman Catholic doctrine of the real presence into his teaching of the Lord's Supper.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, William Goode, the author of *The Rule of Faith*, was engaged with many Anglo-Catholics in the debate about the validity of baptismal regeneration.⁶¹ On the political front, Lord Shaftesbury, in his parliament speeches, had been vocal about his opposition.⁶² He feared the Oxford Movement would bring in 'high church Catholic features' into the Church of England.

2.3. *God and His Messenger*

When it comes to God, Spurgeon believes that God has a purpose in sending London the cholera virus. Taking his cue from his text (Amos 3:4-5): as a lion roars when it catches a prey and as trap is laid for the purpose of catching a bird, 'God had a purpose in sending tribulation, we may expect that He will not remove it until that purpose is answered'.⁶³ With such a view about the epidemic, Spurgeon was not peerless. Most outspoken in this regard was Christian socialist and English clergyman Charles Kingsley.⁶⁴ In his three watershed sermons on the topic, Kingsley attrib-

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 453-4.

⁶⁰ John Harrison, *An Answer to Dr. Pusey's Challenge Respecting the Doctrine of the Real Presence* (London: Longmans, Green and company, 1871).

⁶¹ Bruce D. Griffith and Jason R. Radcliff, *Grace and Incarnation: The Oxford movement's Shaping of the Character of Modern Anglicanism* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2020), p. 104.

⁶² Stanley Holbrooke-Jones, 'The Triumph of Anglo-Catholicism Challenged', *Churchman* 119 (2005): 159-78, here p. 161.

⁶³ Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 456.

⁶⁴ Most preachers during this time would agree with Spurgeon and Kingsley that the epidemic is the result of people's sins. One exception is Florence Nightingale, for her views, see *Florence Nightingale on Society and Politics, Philosophy, Science, Education & Literature*, ed. by Lynn McDonald, vol 5 of the *Collected Works of Florence Nightingale* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2003), p. 780.

utes the cause of the outbreak to the transgressions of the people when he denounces, 'Fever and cholera, as you would expect them to be, are the expression of God's judgment, God's opinion, God's handwriting on the wall against us for our sins of filth and laziness, foul air, foul food, foul drains, foul bedrooms'.⁶⁵

Similarly, J. C. Ryle, the evangelical vicar of Stradbroke in Suffolk and the first Bishop of Liverpool, in his tract called *The Hand of the Lord!*, insists that 'cholera, like every other pestilence, is a direct visitation from God'.⁶⁶ He continues:

Some men will tell us confidently that cholera arises entirely from second causes. Bad drainage, bad water, want of cleanliness, want of sufficient food — all these are enough in the eyes of these men to explain the present visitation. But unfortunately for these people there was no drainage at all in former day! The streets of our great cities were dirty and unpaved! The water supply was miserably defective! The sanitary condition of the people was in every respect disgracefully bad. Yet in these days there was not cholera. No! it will not do. Second causes, no doubt, may help on cholera when cholera begins. But second causes will not account for its beginning. There is no standing ground for a man on this point, but the simple ground of the Bible [...] It is the Lord's hand!⁶⁷

Though Spurgeon would agree with Ryle and Kingsley regarding how God was the one behind the plague, he was more nuanced in the way he talked about God. God, in the sermon, is depicted as a multi-dimensional traveller in the sermon. Spurgeon describes:

Two travellers have been walking together for some little time, but all of a sudden they fall to angry words, and after a while one strikes the other and maltreats him. You cannot suppose that the person thus attacked will continue to walk with him who maliciously assaults him. They must part company.⁶⁸

In depicting God as a fellow visitor, Spurgeon places God on the same level as the congregants. Rather than pointing an accusatory finger at his parishioners, God's dissatisfaction surfaces in a discussion between two comrades through a series of questions. With the use of sixty-five ques-

⁶⁵ Charles Kingsley, *Sermons on National Subjects* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1880), p. 141.

⁶⁶ J.C. Ryle, *The Hand of the Lord' Being Thoughts on Cholera* (London: William Hunt, 1865), p. 10.

⁶⁷ Ryle, *Hand of the Lord*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 450.

tions in this message alone, Spurgeon's use of rhetorical questions is certainly poignant. According to Gloria Anzilotti, the use of questions in a debate not only lowers the defences of the opponent, but it also signals the willingness to listen and negotiate.⁶⁹ Similarly, Spurgeon's questions serve a pastoral function, it shows that his openness to the struggles of his parishioners towards holiness.

More importantly, through the use of rhetorical questions, Spurgeon wants to show how sin 'maliciously assaults' God.⁷⁰ He queries, 'Brothers and Sisters, let me ask you soberly, without fanaticism, to consider whether there has not been enough in England, and especially in this great city, to make God angry with us?'⁷¹

In contrast to a muted church devoid of witnesses, for Spurgeon, 'cholera' is God's prime messenger. Spurgeon elaborates, 'My Brothers and Sisters, our God is too gracious to send us this cholera without a question'.⁷² As a 'gentle blow from his hand',⁷³ Spurgeon believes that God allows the disease to disrupt the lives of Londoners so that they may turn to God in repentance. Spurgeon explains:

We heard of some 1,200 or more who died in a week in London, but did we estimate the aggregate of personal pain couched in that number, the aggregate of sorrow brought to so many hundred families, the aggregate too of eternal interests which were involved in those sudden deaths? Time and eternity, both of them big with tremendous importance, were wrapped up, just so many times in those hundreds who fell beneath the Mower's scythe. Do you think the Lord does this for nothing? The great Lion of Vengeance has not roared unless sin has provoked Him.⁷⁴

How does Spurgeon characterize cholera in the sermon? First, cholera takes on the persona of the angel of death. Recalling Exodus 12:23 where God's angel strikes the firstborn of Egypt in the middle of the night, cholera is tasked with a similar assignment. Spurgeon elucidates:

⁶⁹ Gloria I. Anzilotti, 'The Rhetorical Question as an Indirect Speech Device in English and Italian', *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 38 (1982): 290-302. See also, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 132 and Pauline Slot, *How Can You Say That? Rhetorical Questions in Argumentative Texts*, SLLU 2 (Amsterdam: IFOTT, 1993).

⁷⁰ Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 450.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 454.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 452.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

When God permits disease to walk through the streets at night, to stretch out his mighty but invisible hand, and take away here a child, and there an adult, and consign to the grave those who might have otherwise long survived, you cannot believe that the Lord commissioned so dread a messenger, without intending to answer some end by his errand.⁷⁵

By personifying cholera as an angel of death roaming the streets at night ready to prowl on a child or an adult, an arresting fear is immediately struck with his hearers. Instead of just an invisible virus, now his congregants not only 'see' the disease, but they can also feel the terror blowing onto their skin as they imagine walking in the back alleys in the middle of the night.

To make his congregants feel even more vulnerable, he describes the virus as 'a snare', an image borrowed from Amos 3:5.⁷⁶ Like a bird who is susceptible to fall captive to a fowler's snare, human beings have no inoculation against the virus. Fear is heightened when Spurgeon further develops the imagery, 'The fowler takes not away his net unless some bird is caught, and God takes not away the trouble which He sends unless He has answered His Design by it'.⁷⁷

Second, following his text in Amos 3:6, Spurgeon also likens the cholera virus to a trumpet. If the imagery of the angel of death appeals to the people's sight and emotions, the blow of the trumpet evokes their aural faculties. Earlier in the sermon when Spurgeon's London was filled with the sounds of revelry, now the virus blast has taken over. It now 'reach(es) the miserable attics where the poor are crowded together [...] the darkest cellar in the most crowded haunt of vice [...] the palaces of kings [...] (and) the halls of the rich and great'.⁷⁸ Spurgeon hopes that such appeals will incite enough fear that they may 'fly to Christ Jesus'.⁷⁹

Finally, according to Forster, the test for a multi-dimensional or round character is that it is capable to evolve or change.⁸⁰ God's character is developed as the sermon progresses. As God's call for repentance continues to fall on deaf ears, God reveals that he is more than just a wayfarer in the city. Rather, he continues his tour now as a judge dispensing his punishments on the people. Spurgeon indicts:

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 456.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 458.

⁸⁰ Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 50.

God *Himself* is traversing London. God, with footstep walks the hospitals, enters the chamber, strikes the wayfarer in the street, and chills the heart of the suppliant kneeling by his bed. God, the great Judge of All [...] it was none other than *He* who walked down our crowded courts and entering our lanes and alleys called one after another the souls of men to their last account! God *is abroad!*⁸¹

All of these rhetorical devices are employed with a singular purpose in mind. They are created so that the people may be terrified at God's fiery indignation, so that they may run to the gospel that Jesus offers.⁸² This is what we will turn to in the next section of the article.

3. THE GOSPEL AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHARACTERS

God is not the character who changes within the narrative of the message. According to Spurgeon, the gospel of Jesus can also change the city and its habitants. In his initial depiction of London, the taverns are filled with drunkards, the streets are filled with violence, and riots frequent the music halls. Besides, morbid language is used throughout to describe the city. London, for instance, is described as a 'cemetery',⁸³ the taverns as 'hell',⁸⁴ and the musical halls as 'the gates of the grave'.⁸⁵ Meanwhile, the social life of the city is likened to 'a terrible monster'.⁸⁶ With children being kidnapped and adults assaulted at night, Spurgeon's London is inhumane, dangerous, and savage.

In a city that is devoid of warmth and love, Jesus is presented as one whose 'eternal love sweetly entangle [sic] me, I am, I would be, thine'.⁸⁷ Where cholera functions like as a fowler's trap, Spurgeon urges his hearers to 'fly to Jesus! Sinner, fly! Be taken in God's net'.⁸⁸ Moreover, for a city that is depicted as inebriated, Spurgeon urges the people to drink from the water of life with a paraphrase of Isaiah 12:3: 'Come. And let him who hears say, Come. And let him who is thirsty come. And whoever will, let him take the water of life freely'.⁸⁹

⁸¹ Italics are in the original, Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 458.

⁸² Spurgeon, 'Voice of Cholera', p. 461.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 460.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 458.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 462.

Though Spurgeon does not promise that the Jesus will heal every case of infection or that God will remove the epidemic once the people turn to Christ, he promises something even better. He promises them a joy untouchable by death. Spurgeon explicates:

When I heard the other day that Mrs. So-and-So was dead, and that she died of cholera, I could not lament, for she was one who had long feared God. When they told me that a worthy young man had fallen, I was sorrowful to have lost so good a student from the College, but I was thankful that one who had served his God so well in his youth had gone to his rest; but if I heard of the death of some of you; it would cause me unmingled grief and fear.⁹⁰

For Spurgeon, Jesus is the epidemic's ultimate panacea. Geoffrey Chang, in his analysis of the theology of Spurgeon, concurs, 'Committed to preaching Christ, Spurgeon was convinced the world needed no other remedy'.⁹¹ The preaching of the gospel, according to the esteemed preacher, is what changes the church and subsequently the city. Spurgeon pleads that the church will find its voice in the articulation of the gospel: 'If you and I do not exert ourselves to teach them the Gospel, upon our heads must be their blood'.⁹²

As a result of the church's witness, the city will become more and more humane. Rather than just revelling in booze and debauchery, they will start caring for the unconverted and the neighbour sitting next to them in church.

Have you no friends unconverted? Have you no acquaintance unsaved? May there not be even sitting in the pew with you some unpardoned person? May there not be, Sunday after Sunday, sitting in the next seat someone who knows not Christ, who was never warned of his danger or pointed to the Remedy.⁹³

Augmenting his vision of a more personal and caring city, Spurgeon adds his own personal plea:

I speak to you as a dying man, and pray you not to venture into Eternal Wrath. Give these words some consideration, I pray you, and as you consider them, may God the Holy Spirit fasten them as nails in a sure place, and may you seek the Lord while he may be found.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 461.

⁹¹ Geoffrey Chang, *Spurgeon the Pastor: Recovering a Biblical and Theological Vision for Ministry* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2022), p. 17.

⁹² Ibid., p. 461.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 462.

4. CONCLUDING APPLICATIONS

Having examined how Spurgeon uses characterization in his preaching, it is worth asking, what bearing does this have on sermon preparations today? First, the characters in Spurgeon's sermon are well-situated within the happenstances of the time. Spurgeon in fact has written an entire book, *The Bible and the Newspaper*, illustrating how sermons should never be divorced from the world around us.⁹⁵ In this sermon, Spurgeon not only shows his understanding of the cholera epidemic, but he also shows his understanding of what was happening within the Oxford Movement and its impact on the churches. Therefore, for preachers to be effective communicators of God's word, we need to understand both our congregations and the worlds we are living in.

Second, Spurgeon gives the characters in his message a multiple dimensional reality. London, for instance, is not just a city. Rather, in the sermon, we get to see the night life of the city, smell the filth of the River Thames, and we get to feel the terror of how cholera like an angel of death coming to kidnap a child in middle of an isolated alley. In his autobiography, Spurgeon speaks of the importance not only of reading the Bible, but also to 'see' the text. He illustrates:

I often fancy that I am looking out upon the Lake of Gennesaret, or walking at the foot of the Mount of Olives, or peering into the mysterious gloom of the Garden of Gethsemane. The narrow streets of the old town are such as Jesus traverse, these villages are such as He inhabited.⁹⁶

Similarly, it is not enough for preachers to just describe the text. Rather, we need to help our congregants see, feel, hear, and touch the various aspects of the sermon.

Finally, Spurgeon has a high view of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For the preacher, the gospel not only brings joy that prevails over death and diseases, but it also brings about lasting transformation. Likewise, we need to expect that God can bring changes through the preaching of the gospel. This calls to mind a time when one of Spurgeon's students by the name Mr. Medhurst paid his mentor a visit. Complaining that he has never witnessed a single conversion after three months of regular preaching, Med-

⁹⁵ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Bible and the Newspaper* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1880).

⁹⁶ Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, IV, p. 219.

hurst expresses his frustrations.⁹⁷ ‘Why’? Spurgeon asks, ‘you don’t expect conversions every time you open your mouth, do you’?

‘Of course not’. To which Spurgeon concludes, ‘Then that is just the reason you haven’t had them’.

⁹⁷ Charles Ray, *The Life of Charles Haddon Spurgeon* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1903), pp. 325-28.