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# Book Review: Communion with Christ and His People

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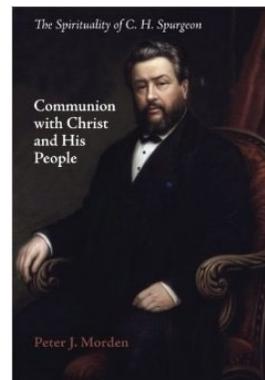
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Peter J. Morden. *Communion with Christ and His People: The Spirituality of C. H. Spurgeon*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014. 318 pp. £24.00/\$39.00.

Charles Spurgeon, often referred to as “the prince of preachers,” has had significant trans-Atlantic influence over the last two centuries in terms of ministry practice, preaching, and devotional Christianity. He has, however, at times received scant attention in the world of academia, perhaps due to his focus on reaching the common man through his ministry, and not writing works of great theological weight. Nevertheless, when considering the staggering number of sermons preached and works written, all with attentiveness to theological acumen, Spurgeon is certainly worthy of attention in the academic world. Peter Morden, in his work *Communion with Christ and His People*, offers to readers a distinctive, thorough, and rigorous investigation of the spiritual practices of Spurgeon that sustained him in a lifetime of frenetic ministry.



Morden is Vice Principal of Spurgeon’s College and Professor of Church History and Spirituality. This book is a revision of his dissertation, focusing on the diverse range of factors that affected Spurgeon’s spirituality. Due to the various ways in which the term “spirituality” can be understood, the author specifies his meaning and asserts that Christian spirituality embodies both the interior life of the soul and the concrete ways this interior life is expressed and lived out. Thus, “spirituality is understood as being concerned with the conjunction of theology, prayer, and practical Christianity” (p. 3). In seeking to demonstrate the internal and external aspects of Spurgeon’s spirituality, Morden argues that the phrase “communion with Christ and his people” represents the integrating theme of Spurgeon’s approach to spirituality (p. 14). As such, each portion of spirituality discussed has both personal and corporate aspects.

The work is structured in such a way as to follow the historical chronology of Spurgeon’s life, though several chapters simply refer to these spiritual realities as seen in his overall ministry. Utilizing an extensive amount of primary source material, the author begins (chapter 2) with the “Puritan piety” of Spurgeon, discussing his upbringing around such authors as Watson, Brooks, and Bunyan, and his reception of Calvinistic theology. From these roots, chapter 3 discusses conversionism, a key facet of evangelicalism, as outlined by David Bebbington. This chapter discusses Spurgeon’s own conversion, while also highlighting his Calvinist soteriology that gave rise to a zeal for evangelism, which he considered to be a key mark of the spirituality of the Christian. His understanding of conversion was also tightly tied to his theology of baptism (chapter 4). Rejecting baptismal regeneration outright, Spurgeon highly valued his own baptism and believed, “Being baptized as a believer was a crucial next step following conversion, establishing him on the path of discipleship, a pilgrimage that was both with Christ and to Christ” (105).

The following two chapters discuss Spurgeon’s understanding and use of Scripture (chapter 5) and prayer (chapter 6) in relation to Christian spirituality. Both of these means were central and essential in pursuing communion with Christ and his church. The final chapters discuss the Lord’s Supper (chapter 7), activism (chapter 8), holiness (chapter 9), and suffering (chapter 10) respectively. In affirming a real spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper and seeking to celebrate corporately, Spurgeon again sees spirituality as communion with Christ and his bride. Morden discusses these other aspects as well,

demonstrating the various strands of influence that affected Spurgeon's thinking, but always to the end that communion with Christ and his people was the centralizing motif of his spirituality.

Morden has presented the reader with a well-reasoned and historically informed work to digest and consider regarding this aspect of Spurgeon's life and ministry. There were times that felt as though his thesis was slightly strained. For example, in seeking to demonstrate how Spurgeon communed with God's people in relation to the Bible, Morden speaks of the Psalms in *Treasury of David* and the biblical commentaries he used as "friends" that he communed with (pp. 131–32). In seeking to hold to "communion with Christ and his people" as central to Spurgeon's spirituality, this may push the evidence in an unnecessary direction.

However, the instances of this occurring in the work are few, and overwhelmingly Morden uses evidence accurately and is careful not to go beyond where it leads. A good example of this is found in speaking of Spurgeon's conversion. Recognizing there are tensions in the way Spurgeon told this narrative over the course of his ministry, the author deftly cites the sources, deals with the realities, and offers a conclusion constrained by the best evidence (pp. 50–55). This is typical of the work as a whole, as demonstration of this integrative motif certainly holds true in Spurgeon's overall approach to Christian spirituality. The author does a great service to his readers in making this theme plain, and also alluding to the number of influences on Spurgeon's thinking (e.g. Calvinism, Puritanism, Roman Catholic mystics, Romanticism, Enlightenment thinking, etc.).

As a recently published dissertation, Morden helpfully places the work in the midst of burgeoning Spurgeon scholarship. As such, scholars of Spurgeon, Christian spirituality, the history of British Christianity, and the history of evangelicalism will benefit greatly from this work. Morden's book fits a helpful niche for the ever-expanding literature on spirituality, and also captures well the need to cite multiple historically contextualized influences on Spurgeon's thinking. Also, due to its subject matter, its readability, and the applicable subject matter of Christian spirituality, this material will profit pastors and students alike. This worthwhile volume educates at a number of levels, and surely it is the hope of the author that all who read of this titanic, yet flawed, figure will recognize the spiritual disciplines that sustained him and pursue a similar path.

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