

Semănătorul (The Sower)

The Journal of Ministry and Biblical Research

Volume 2, Number 1.

Articles published by the Faculty of Theology in Emanuel
University of Oradea, and International Contributors,
September 2021.

Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania

A Vision to Emulate: Spurgeon's College and its Recognition of the Importance of Principles from Charles Spurgeon to His Students

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ABSTRACT:

Charles Spurgeon's book *Lectures to My Students* has influenced tens of thousands of Christians since its first publication. In his weekly lectures, Spurgeon sought to impress upon future leaders key principles that he embodied in his own life and ministry. Although the focus of the article is upon how these principles have been embedded in the current College's strategic plan, they can apply to any Theological Training Institute.

KEY WORDS: Education, enterprise, mission, strategy, vision

INTRODUCTION

Spurgeon's College, London, was founded by the great Victorian preacher and philanthropist Charles Haddon Spurgeon in 1856. He recognised the injustice and frustration faced by those who desired to serve churches as ordained ministers but who had not benefitted from the academic education required to gain entry for professional training. Spurgeon wanted to embrace natural talents and abilities and looked for potential and passion, rather than academic privilege and family connections, when recruiting his students. From its modest beginnings in terms of student numbers, over 5000 churches worldwide have been served by Spurgeon's ministers and its trained ministers are active in over 35 countries. Today Spurgeon's College continues to prepare candidates for ordination to Baptist ministry within the Baptist Union of Great Britain and pastors from other denominations and those called to missional work in its ministerial formation programmes.

In the "Introduction and Apology" section in *Lecturers to My Students*,² Spurgeon recounts how he visited his College regularly on Fridays. During these visits he would meet with students and give a lecture to them on various subjects. He recalls how he found the students weary from studying and that he purposely made his lectures "colloquial, familiar, full of anecdote and often

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² C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*. Available from [www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/spurgeon/Lectures to My Students-C.H. Spurgeon.pdf](http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/spurgeon/Lectures%20to%20My%20Students-C.H.%20Spurgeon.pdf) (accessed 2 June 21).

humorous.”³ Today, *Lecturers to My Students* is known internationally and has remained in continuous print since its first publication in 1875. Despite their celebrated status, Spurgeon’s lectures were never intended, or prepared, for “the public eye” as he phrased it.⁴ In his reflection on why he was publishing, in essence, his insights into Christian ministry Spurgeon says that he was:

conscious of no motive in printing them but that of desiring to keep my counsels alive in the memories of those who heard them years ago, and impressing them upon others who dwell beyond the precincts of our classroom.⁵

It is interesting to note that Spurgeon was conscious of impressing his “counsels,” shared with his students, but upon others well beyond his College in London. Rather than focus upon how the counsel of the Prince of Preachers might be embraced by other theological institutions, this article will focus upon three key principles that may be identified in *Lectures to My Students*, and how these have been recognised by Spurgeon’s College in the 21st century. This genesis of this article is a reflection, by the author, on the educational and societal landscape within which the College has to operate in the contemporary world.

A critical element in the armoury of the leader of an organisation or institution is that of strategic leadership.⁶ At the heart of this concept is the leader’s ability to coherently express a strategic vision for their organisation, which becomes the basis upon they seek to persuade colleagues and staff to “buy in” to that vision. Needless to say, this is a difficult task and requires time, patience and absolute belief in the vision finally presented to others. There may be many contributing factors in why this is a difficult task but one of them is that the majority of people do not work or operate at the strategic or policy level within an organisation. The majority of people work at what may be described as the tactical level (i.e. where the focus is upon doing tasks or procedures), or at the operational level (i.e. where there is a coordinating of different tasks and procedures to ensure coherence or output). At the strategic and policy level the focus is different to the tactical and operational. It is not dislocated from the first and second order of focus but rather is primarily concerned with the direction of travel an organisation must take and underlying principles that shape that journey. Those who have the responsibility of working at the strategic and policy level will often seek to derive their strategic vision from core

³ Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*, “Introduction and Apology.”

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For an interesting introduction to mapping the dimensions of strategic leadership, see, B.J. Davies & B. Davies. Strategic Leadership, in *School of Management and Leadership*, Vol 24, 2004, 29-38.

foundational principles, while ensuring that the broad goals the organisation is striving to achieve exist in symbiotic alignment.

This short article will explain some of the thinking underpinning important elements in the Spurgeon College's current strategic plan and demonstrate that it takes seriously key principles that Mr Spurgeon shared with his students regarding his approach to education, enterprise and mission. Even though the current strategic vision of the College will result in change, the College is nevertheless, moving closer to critical components that can be identified in *Lectures to My Students*. Significant change within Christian communities can be disconcerting, especially if some within those communities do not fully understand the principles underpinning the change. The three principles explored in this reflection will provide assurance that the College not only recognises the importance of these principles but has embedded them in its strategic vision and plan. The focus remains the College's ongoing mission of training and preparing gospel centred servants of the Living God, and as such it has been written for a Christian readership.



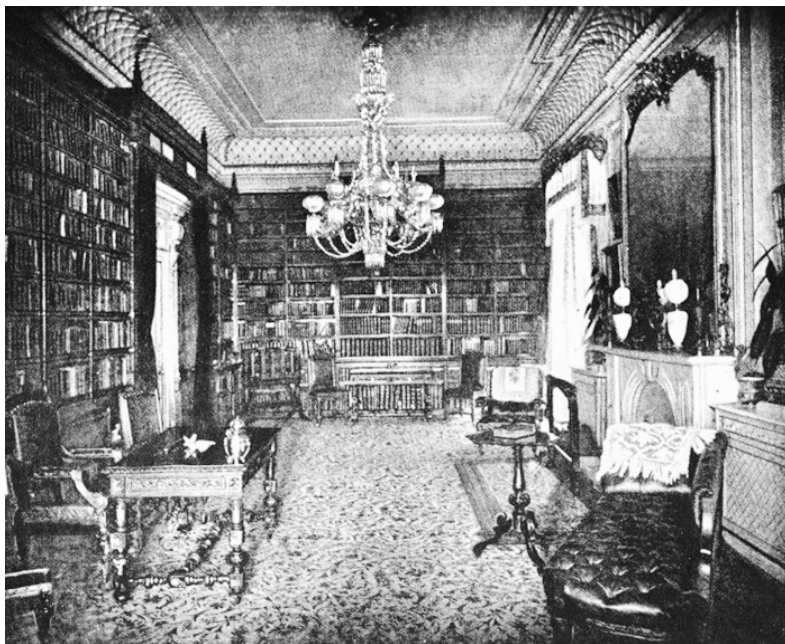
A frieze of Mr Spurgeon lecturing to his students

PRINCIPLE 1: MINISTRY DEMANDS EDUCATION

Charles Spurgeon declared to his students that “our ministry demands mind.”⁷ For Spurgeon, education was a critical part of the student and minister’s life.

⁷ Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*, “The Necessity of Ministerial Progress”.

This priority is shown in the earliest days of the Christian church, when the Apostle Paul admonished his protégé Timothy to “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). Spurgeon’s personal library was testimony to his lifelong desire to deepen his knowledge of God, the scriptures, and the world around him. The College library in Temple Street must have made a lasting impression on every student to the importance Spurgeon placed on providing the tools necessary to equip servants of God for ministry. For Spurgeon reading was a necessity not only for pastors but for all Christians.



Spurgeon’s library at Westwood



The college library in Temple Street

Spurgeon told his students that “we must give Him our mind as well as our affections, and that mind should be well furnished, that we may not offer Him an empty casket...we must cultivate ourselves to the highest point, and we should do this, first, by gathering in knowledge that we may fill the barn, and then by acquiring discrimination that we may winnow the heap.”⁸ The study of the scriptures was for Spurgeon, the main business of the servant of God but he was quick also to say “we must not confine ourselves to one topic of study.” Spurgeon stated that, “it seems to me that every student for the Christian ministry ought to know at least something of every science; [they] should intermeddle with every form of knowledge that may be useful in [their] life’s work.”⁹ The curriculum at Spurgeon’s College was educationally broad. Indeed, Spurgeon said, “to all we labour to give a liberal English education and sound Biblical education.”¹⁰ Included in the curriculum, along with the study of scripture, doctrine, church history and the conduct of church work was a basic introduction to: Astronomy, Chemistry, Zoology, Geology, Botany, Moral Philosophy, Metaphysics, Mathematics, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Poetry, the first six books of Euclid and Practical Oratory.¹¹ Studying at Spurgeon’s College,

⁸ Ibid.

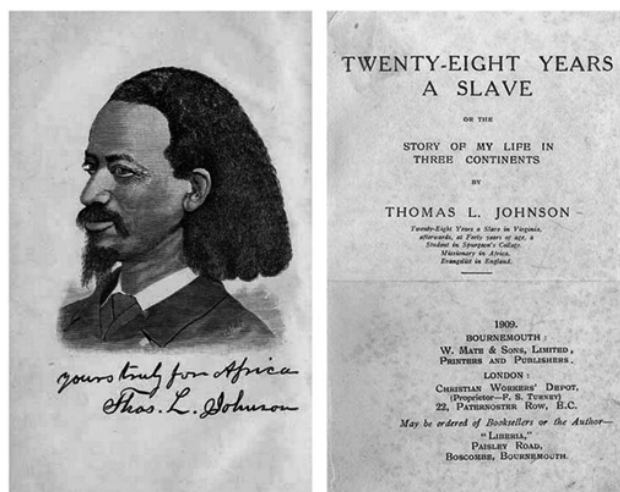
⁹ Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*, Lecture XXVIII, “The Sciences as Sources of Illustration Astronomy.”

¹⁰ *Annual Report* (1886) 32.

¹¹ See M. Nicholls, *Lights to the World: A History of Spurgeon’s College 1856-1992* (Harpenden, Herts: Nuprint, 1994).

both during and after the Presidency of Charles Spurgeon was extremely demanding and pressurised.

Thomas Johnson gives a fascinating insight into the demands upon students at Mr Spurgeon's College in his amazing book *Twenty-Eight Years a Slave*.¹²



As an enslaved man, Mr Johnson had heard about Charles Spurgeon, who was well-known in the United States as an abolitionist and fierce critic of slavery. After his emancipation, Thomas Johnson wanted to travel to England and study at Mr Spurgeon's College. When in England, his friend Mr Hind Smith wrote to Mr Spurgeon inquiring if Thomas would be admitted as a student. The reply was very simple: "Dear Mr. Hind Smith,—Yes, let the dear man come—C. H. Spurgeon."¹³ Mr Johnson talks of his relationship with Mr Spurgeon in his book but also provides a fascinating insight into the pressures and demands of studying at Spurgeon's College. One such example relates to the use of a "Blue Letter." In his account Mr Johnson says:

One day I heard that Mr.---- had received a "Blue Letter." "Blue Letter? Blue Letter?" I wondered what it could mean at all. I enquired of Brother Davis if he could enlighten me about the matter. "Well," said he, "You know Mr.----? He has made no progress, no proficiency. Men coming to the College are looked upon as men, not as children, and are supposed to take advantage of the opportunities offered them. If they fail to do this they are advised to leave, and the advice is generally given to them in the form of a letter." "That's it," thought I, "that 'Blue Letter' haunted me. Mr.---- had left quietly, and no one seemed

¹² Available at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/johnson1/johnson.html> (accessed 2 June 21).

¹³ Mr. Spurgeon's reply is in the heritage collect at Spurgeon's College.

to know where he had gone. After this, in the tram, in the bus, in the railway carriage, at home, or at meeting appointments, not a moment would be lost in my effort to grasp my lessons. In fact, this 'Blue Letter' information was quite a help by stirring me up to more earnest endeavours. I regard my connection with the Pastors' College as the turning point in an important passage of my life's history, for which I feel continually grateful. I am sure that I never could have so well succeeded in the African Mission, or in Evangelistic work at home, had it not been for the training and fraternal helpfulness of the Pastors' College, with its many advantages, and I shall remember in all my work how that I gathered strength and wisdom from the faithful tuition so kindly given me.

While Spurgeon's College stopped using "Blue Letters" many, many years ago, it has never ceased striving to provide the highest quality of training and formation in its ministry of equipping the servant of God for the ministry that God has called them to. Part of its strategic plan will see a deliberate broadening of the educational programmes on offer at the College. This will take the shape of developing and then offering dual honours programmes/pathways (Philosophy, Sociology, Psychology, Counselling etc.), which in turn will create the opportunity for ministerial students to access a wider range of elective units as part of their overall ministerial formation, along much the same lines as described by Mr Spurgeon in his lectures to his students. The principle of "ministry demands education" reflects, in the opinion of the author, an important component of ministerial formation, in that ministers of the gospel must have a breadth of preparation that enables them to serve effectively in a modern setting and engage intelligently with a non-Christian, or even post-Christian society.

PRINCIPLE 2: MINISTRY REQUIRES ENTERPRISE

In Lecture XXI "Earnestness: Its Marring and Maintenance" Spurgeon tells his students to "look well to yourselves that you do not become flat, stale, and unprofitable, and keep yourselves sweet by maintaining an enterprising spirit."¹⁴ Turning the focus of his lecture upon those students who were about to leave College and embark upon their ministry Spurgeon says:

Stir the fire also by frequent attempts at fresh service. Shake yourself out of routine by breaking away from the familiar fields of service...I suggest to you, as a subordinate but very useful means of keeping the heart fresh, the frequent addition of new work to your usual engagements...You will have a good share of work to do, and few to help you in it, and the years will grind along heavily; watch against this, and use all means to prevent your becoming dull and sleepy, and among them use that which experience leads me to press upon you. I find

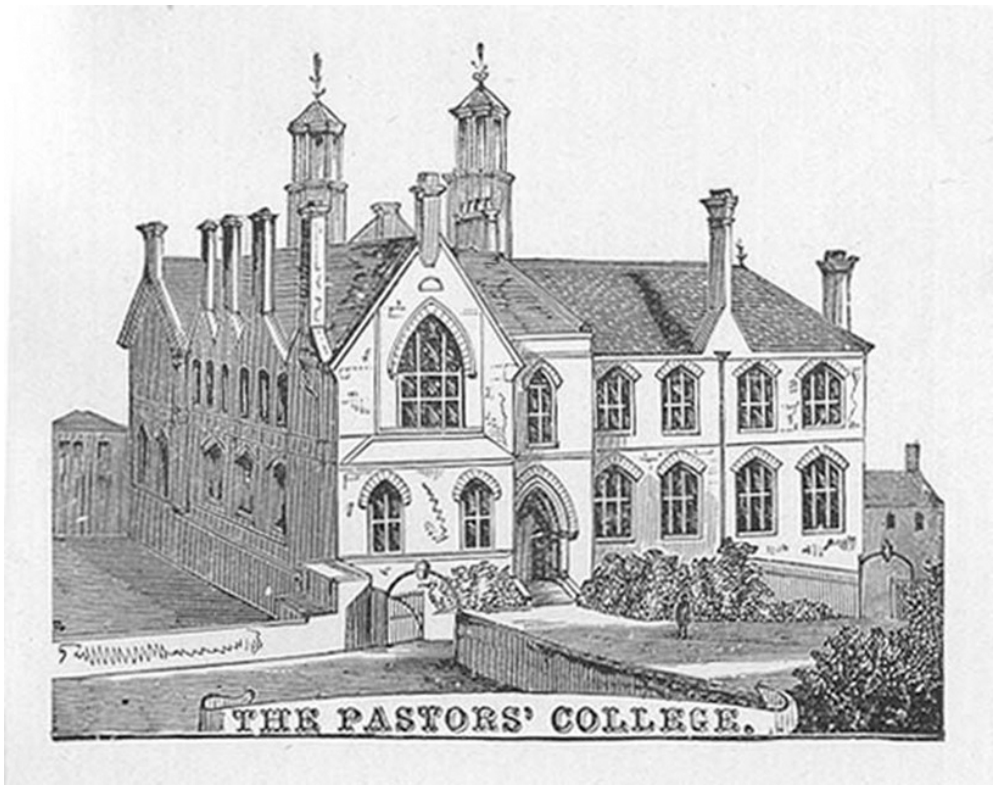
¹⁴ Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*.

it good for myself to have some new work always to hand. The old and usual enterprises must be kept up, but somewhat must be added to them...Never say "it is enough," nor accept the policy of "rest and be thankful." Do all you possibly can, and then do a little more.

The English word enterprise means "a project or undertaking, especially a bold or complex one." It is not possible to study the life of Charles Spurgeon and fail to see the lived example of this definition of enterprise in every aspect of his life and ministry. He was not someone who simply "talked a good talk." His whole life was a living testimony of ministry maintaining an enterprising spirit. In his life, Spurgeon pastored the largest church in the world (6000 members), preached between four to ten times a week, wrote about 150 books, edited a monthly magazine, sold thousands of copies of his sermons published in *The Penny Pulpit*, and established and oversaw sixty-six Christian charities, two of which continue to this day: Spurgeon's College and Spurgeon's children's charity.



MR. SPURGEON'S ORPHANAGE, STOCKWELL.



Spurgeon's enterprise and voluminous output was noticed among his contemporaries. The missionary David Livingstone once asked him "how can you accomplish so much in one day?" Mr Spurgeon replied, "you forget Mr Livingstone, there are two of us working."¹⁵ There is a very real sense in which Spurgeon's enterprising spirit embodies the great challenge from the father of modern Protestant missions, William Carey, who said "expect great things from God and attempt great things for God." Spurgeon lived his life as someone who attempted great things for God because he lived in constant partnership with the Lord he committed his entire life to and who achieves "for more abundantly than all we ask or think" (Eph 3:20).

Charles Spurgeon's ethos of never saying "it is enough," or "rest and be thankful" but "do all you possibly can, and then do a little more" can appear challenging to some modern Christians. The entrepreneurial spirit, however, frequently identifiable when God is at work accomplishing his sovereign purposes, is always recognisable in the enterprising spirit of those seeking to

¹⁵ Spurgeon was referring to his wife Susanna. For an excellent introduction into the life of this amazing servant of God see, R. Rhodes, *Susie: The Life and Legacy of Susannah Spurgeon, Wife of Charles H. Spurgeon* (Chicago: Moody, 2018).

work in partnership with their God. While every generation of Christians face challenges that may be distinct to their own age, the church in Great Britain is facing a well-documented decline in regular church attendance.¹⁶ The decline in church attendance has also been accompanied with a stark change in public attitude towards Christianity and Christians. The sociologist Steve Bruce observes that since the 1851 Census of Religious Worship in Great Britain, “the typical Briton has gone from churchgoing Christian, to nominal Christian, to non-Christian who nonetheless thinks religion (in the abstract at least) is a good thing, to being someone who supposes that religion does more harm than good.”¹⁷ In an increasingly secular, post-Christian age the church can not only survive but thrive if it looks to its heritage and embraces an entrepreneurial, enterprising spirit. Like the unchanging nature and character of God, the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, is still “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16).

In the introduction to his book *Lectures to my Students*, Spurgeon writes of wishing to “foster the spirit of consecration, courage, and confidence in God.” Godly courage comes from a consecrated heart and mind that has absolute confidence in God. Those who manifest these godly traits can, as Church history reveals, face opposition. William Carey was considered an enthusiast, a radical by his contemporaries and Spurgeon was regularly ridiculed in the British press for his uncompromising presentation of the gospel. Spirit filled entrepreneurial disciples who embrace and manifest an enterprising spirit will invariably face criticism and ridicule. A spirit of enterprise requires courage and a determination to hold one’s nerve. It means being willing to move dynamically out of well-defined comfort zones and being comfortable taking and holding critical things at risk, while taking balanced and measured decisions. Enterprise is not being radical for the sake of being radical. As Spurgeon told his students:

The old and usual enterprises must be kept up, but somewhat must be added to them...Never say “it is enough,” nor accept the policy of “rest and be thankful.” Do all you possibly can, and then do a little more.

“Ministry requires enterprise,” is and must remain a key principle that can provide a living link with the great heroes of the Christian faith but must be as natural to the servant of God as breath is to the lungs.

PRINCIPLE 3: MINISTRY INSPIRES MISSION

Charles Spurgeon’s passion for preaching the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ is infused in his sermons, books, letters and lectures to his students. In

¹⁶ See P. Brierley, *Pulling Out of the Nose Dive: A Contemporary Picture of Churchgoing; what the 2005 English Church Census Reveals* (Swindon: Christian Research, 2006).

¹⁷ S. Bruce, *British Gods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 270.

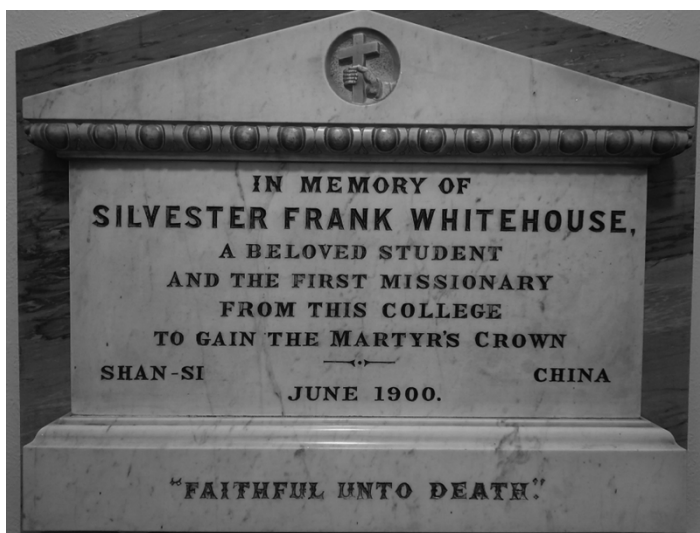
Lecture XV, “The Necessity of Ministerial Progress,” Spurgeon moves on from discussing the necessity of education to ministry and mission.¹⁸ Spurgeon’s last point in this lecture was the challenge to his students to consider mission. For him and many of his contemporaries, an important part of this was preaching the gospel at home and overseas. As an evangelical Calvinist, Spurgeon wrestled with what he described as the millions of people in many countries who “know nothing of our King.” He shared with his students that he had wrestled with the question of “whether I ought to go” but that “after balancing the whole thing I feel bound to keep my place.” For Spurgeon, “each student entering his college should consider this matter, and surrender [themselves] to the work unless there are conclusive reasons for [their] not doing so.” Spurgeon told his students that he was impressed by the German Pastor Harms whose church members had consecrated themselves to mission activity at home and overseas, which included the donation of a house that was used as a missionary college and funding the purchase of a ship to take missionaries to various countries. Spurgeon then turned his attention to Moravians:

Look at the Moravians! How every man and woman becomes a missionary, and how much they do in consequence. Let us catch their spirit. Is it a right spirit? Then it is right for us to have it. It is not enough for us to say, “Those Moravians are very wonderful people!” We ought to be wonderful people too. Christ did not purchase the Moravians any more than he purchased us; they are under no more obligation to make sacrifices than we are... “Forward” is the watchword today! ¹⁹

In the reception of Spurgeon’s College today is a marble plaque in memory to Silvester Frank Whitehouse who, along with his wife and 32,000 Chinese Christians, was killed in China at the age of 33. It is an enduring testimony to the life of a student who went forward to serve his Lord.

¹⁸ Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Lecture XV, “The Necessity of Ministerial Progress.”



The modern day Spurgeon's College draws its vision from three sources: 1, a confessional foundation. It is a Christ-centred, evangelical college in the Baptist tradition, engaged in biblical and theological education; 2, a formative ethos, flowing from our life as a community meeting daily for worship, where preparation for Christian service is enriched by the practice of gathering daily as a community to glorify God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and 3, A geographical location, which is intentionally London based but maintains a national focus and a global reach. In keeping with Charles Spurgeon's entrepreneurial, enterprising missional heart, the College entered into a formal partnership with BMS World Mission in 2019.

A central part of the vision behind this partnership was the opportunity to create a centre capable of meeting a wide range of spiritual and theological needs for global partners, the missional church worldwide and the equipping of missional disciples in the UK. The leadership of the College and BMS World Mission believe that the collaborative partnership could be a critical component in transformational change within the Christian community within the UK and internationally. BMS and Spurgeon's College are actively exploring new opportunities to work with international colleges and missional organisations as assistants and facilitators both in Europe and in the Global South. The College has a long (165 years) and rich experience in ministerial formation, theological and university education. BMS' extensive experience working with international partners, sometimes in demanding cultural contexts, brings a wealth of knowledge, which when combined with Spurgeon's UK higher educational expertise offers a unique combination that is resulting in new and exciting opportunities in a global context. Ministry inspiring mission remains very much a part of the College's strategic plan.

One example of this vision for mission in the contemporary age is a project the College undertook on behalf of the Baptist Union of Great Britain to develop and produce a suite of pioneering, missional leadership courses for Christians with the desire to be change makers through sharing the gospel of the risen Christ. Spurgeon's College was commissioned to create a bespoke suite of courses for pioneers, that had been designed by pioneers, written by pioneers, created by pioneers for pioneers working in new and imaginative ways in the 21st century. The global pandemic has impacted every aspect of life in the UK and time will reveal how enduring this will be as life returns to some form of "normality." Churches and individual Christians across Europe have had to adapt to new "digital" or online approaches to worship and what it means to meet together as a community of believers gathering unto the name of the Lord, using the realm of cyber-space as meeting space. Some commentators have said that Covid-19 only accelerated changes that were already evident in modern life. How churches move forward, as countries emerge from Covid-19 lockdowns and societal restrictions, is perhaps one of the most pressing question for Christian leaders. It is unlikely that the UK will simply resume the pre-Covid patterns familiar to so many; Zoom or Microsoft Teams will continue to play a key role as everyone builds upon the digital skills learned from necessity during the pandemic. The suite of missional leadership courses developed by Spurgeon's College has at their heart the desire to do mission in a contemporary and imaginative way in a rapidly changing and evolving social landscape. The century may be different but the deep desire to be involved in mission remains exactly the same; the gospel of saving grace has not changed, only the societal context in which the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ may be shared.

CONCLUSION

Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher of Ephesus c500 BCE, is well known for his argument on flux; he is reported to have maintained that "It is not possible to step twice into the same river."²⁰ In simple terms, although a river may look the same, it is in a state of continual change. The task of preparing men and women for mission, ministry and leadership in the contemporary world will have elements that remain, at least to some extent, consistent with the past, for example the study of scripture, doctrine, church history and the conduct of church work. This, however, must be contextualised to the societal environment in which ministry is and will be delivered, which in turn will mean that it may appear very different to the experience of those who have gone before. This ancient phenomenon complicates the task of the strategic leader in articulating a vision of the way forward because it may appear to some that too much change

²⁰ Daniel W. Graham, "Heraclitus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/heraclitus/> (accessed 4 June 21).

is or is planned to take place. Every leader knows that sharing a vision for the future is a critical part of their role and although difficult, most will accept that change is necessary.

In a rapidly fluctuating world, in which significant components of change have been accelerated by the global pandemic, Spurgeon's College will remain faithful to its mission by continuing to embrace key principles that Charles Spurgeon shared with his students and manifested in his own personal life, namely:

Principle 1: Ministry demands education

Principle 2: Ministry requires enterprise

Principle 3: Ministry inspires mission

Spurgeon's College continues to seek to remain true to its founder's vision and principles.

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