

The gospel takes precedence

**EVANGELICAL MISSION AND
ANGLICAN CHURCH ORDER**

Charles Simeon Reconsidered

By Andrew Atherstone

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Charles Simeon, the Vicar of Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge in the early 19th century, was in many ways the founding father of the modern evangelical movement in the Church of England.

In this stimulating and well-researched booklet, first delivered as the St. Antholin's Lecture for 2009, Andrew Atherstone examines Simeon's attitude to Anglican church order and shows that the commonly repeated view that he always scrupulously obeyed bishops and canon law, and would urge his 21st-century successors to do the same, does not fit the facts.

Prepared to be radical

For all Simeon's undoubted love for the Church of England and its liturgy, he was prepared to be radical and consistently placed the needs of the gospel above canon law. He engaged in irregular itinerant preaching in the early years of his ministry, began what was in effect a church plant in a neighbouring parish without permission, collaborated closely with Nonconformists and exercised a quasi-episcopal ministry in deploying clergy in England and India, which, if not a direct challenge to episcopal authority, certainly showed his pragmatism in finding ways around established church order. Simeon never supported irregularity for the sake of it and urged restraint on younger hot-headed evangelical ministers in their relationship with hostile bishops,



Charles Simeon

Anglican regulations. He would surely have agreed with John Berridge, the 18th-century Vicar of Everton in Bedfordshire, who wrote: 'Must salvation give place to a fanciful decency, and sinners go flocking to hell through our dread of irregularity? Whilst irregularities in their worst shape traverse the kingdom with impunity, should not irregularity in its best shape pass without censure?'

reminding them of Proverbs 15:1: 'A soft answer turneth away wrath'.

However, Atherstone demonstrates that when the needs of the gospel demanded it, Simeon was prepared either to break, or find a way round,

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